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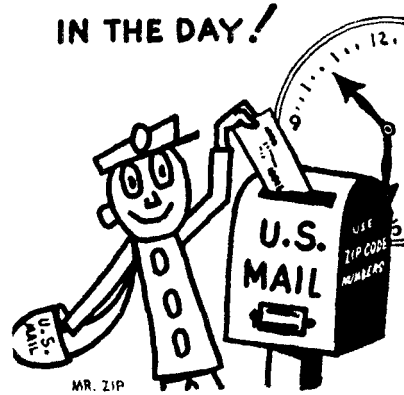

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THE AMBASSADOR'S BOOTS — Agatha Christie — 34

THE FACSIMILE SHOP — William Jeffrey — 47

ANATOMY OF BODY DISPOSAL — Robert McNear — 51

THE CRIME IN NOBODY'S ROOM — John Dickson Carr — 64

MURDER MAKES IT WORSE — William MacHarg — 85

IN THE HOUSE OF RATS — Talmage Powell — 92

THE THEFT OF THE COCO LOOT — Edward D. Hoch — 101

EQMM "First Story"—#346

THE MAN OUT OF THE SNOW — Janelle Bailey — 79

HARDCOVERS AND PAPERBACKS OF THE MONTH — 63

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BLOOD-RED IN THE MORNING

by HUGH PENTECOST

SHE WASN'T WHERE I HOPED she would be, the place we had met for so many dawns so long ago. I stood by the swiftly moving stream and looked down at the literally hundreds of trout, anchored behind the rocks, some of them trying to fight their way upstream. Laura and I used to try to fish some of them out by hand, and more than once we succeeded.

When I was 16 and Laura was 15 we met here almost every fair

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summer morning. We had fishing rods, but mostly we didn't fish. I would bring sandwiches and she would bring a thermos of coffee or milk, depending on the weather, from the big stone house that frowned down on us from the hilltop.

We would sit together on the bank of the stream, without embarrassment, holding hands. The future was quite clear to both of us. I had a year of high school to finish, and then college. After that we would be married, in spite of the stone house and all it stood for. We were irrevocably, totally, peacefully in love.

One morning when I met her in the gray dawn light she showed me a splinter she'd got in the palm of her hand. I tried to pry it loose with the small blade in what had been my Boy Scout knife. Our heads were close together. Suddenly we were looking at each other intently, her blue eyes very bright. I found it hard to breathe. She smelled like clover, like flowers, warm and sweet. And then she was in my arms for the first time, and then, without words or preamble, we were making love on the bank of the stream. It was the most natural thing in the world, because she and I were forever.

Later a shadow fell across us and I turned my head to see what it was. The Old Man was standing over us, like a colossus. He was about six feet five inches tall and 240 pounds of solid bone and muscle. He had a grizzled beard and mustache. In town we called him Big Daddy, after Tennessee Williams' character. He was what the big stone house stood for. He was Laura's father.

He picked me up by the back of the neck as though I were a bag of scrap. Holding me with one hand, he beat me with the other fist, back and forth, until the earth turned into a dark fog. Then he threw me on the ground. He was breathing hard—not from effort, but from pure rage.

"If I ever see you on this property again, John, I'll shoot you down in cold blood for trespassing," he roared at me.

I looked at Laura. She lay with her face buried in the dew-wet grass. What had been perfect had been turned into something shameful. I crawled away, over what seemed like miles of fields, and then under the white wooden fence that surrounded the property.

That was seven years ago.

Until three days ago I had not seen Laura again, except once or twice when she had been driven through town in the family Cadillac. I had written to her, but my letters had been returned, unopened, probably by the Old Man or some other member of the family. I had tried to phone her, but she was never at home.

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I had been too frightened to walk up to the front door of the stone house and demand to see her. I was just a kid.

I didn't blame the Old Man any more. Any father who found his fifteen-year-old daughter lying with a no-good neighborhood kid might have reacted as he had. He could have brought a legal action against me, but he didn't because, I suppose, he didn't want any public scandal to touch Laura.

So I went on, through high school and college, and then into the Army and the jungles of Vietnam. There was never another girl who remotely interested me. Any kind of permanent relationship seemed impossible. I got a letter from my brother when I was only a few months away from my discharge. Secretly I didn't think I would live that long, but I did.

"You remember Laura Gibney?" my brother Eddie wrote. Did I remember her! "She flew the coop about two months ago—took off for Hippieville, I guess. The Old Man had the cops and private detectives and God-knows-who-else looking for her in New York. They finally found her in the East Village living in a pad with half a dozen long-haired goons. She refused to come home and they couldn't make her—she's over twenty-one. She's singing in some kind of night spot in the Village."

I couldn't believe it: Laura living in some dive with half a dozen men, divorced from the luxury and care she'd always had.

I did live out those months in Vietnam, I did get discharged from the Marine Corps, and I did wind up in New York, even before I went home to my family in Connecticut. I wanted to find Laura. She had been on my mind ever since the letter. I fancied myself some kind of hero who would save her from "a fate worse than death."

I had no great trouble finding her. She was singing in a supper club called The Night People's Thing. Her picture was in a glass frame outside the front door. She was singing when I first saw her, accompanying herself on a guitar. Her voice was sweet and clear, and somehow it got you by the throat. She was good.

Her long golden hair hung down her back, beautiful—older but beautiful. The place was crowded with kids, most of the boys long-haired and bearded, most of the girls miniskirted and bare-legged. All were intent on Laura and when she finished on a high plaintive note they stamped and applauded and demanded more. I didn't think she'd seen me, but she put down her guitar and came straight toward me where I was standing at the bar.

"Hello, Johnny," she said.

"Hi." It was a croaking sound.

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"Strange accident, your coming in here," she said.

"It wasn't an accident."

"You were looking for me?" Her blue eyes had changed. They were more sophisticated, wiser, hiding some kind of pain, I thought.

"Yes."

"I would think that was a mistake," she said.

"Can we go some place to talk?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not. I have two more shows to do. And I'm here with friends."

I saw a dark-bearded young man giving me the evil eye from a few yards away. My uniform marked me as part of the unthinkable Establishment.

"When, then?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know, Johnny." She sounded tired. "Shouldn't we skip it?"

"No."

"Do you expect to go up to your family's place in Lakeview?"

"After I've had a chance to talk to you," I said.

"Did you know I'd run away from home?"

"Eddie wrote me."

"Saturday is my father's seventieth birthday. My mother has persuaded me to come home for the celebration. It's a mistake but —well, it means a great deal to her. I'm going to give it a try, but I may turn around and come straight back to town. But if I stay, and if you're in Lakeview, perhaps we could get together."

"Where? When?"

"I'll have to see," she said.

Then she was surrounded by admirers and they quickly crowded me out.

"See you around, Johnny," she called to me.

So that was that.

And now it was just a little after five on Sunday morning. I hadn't heard from her. I thought maybe she'd remember the old days and come to the old place; but she hadn't.

The August dawn was a blood-red, reminding me of the old doggerel about "Sailor take warning." I looked up at the stone house, four stories high, with its ironwork doorways, its terraces and verandas, its huge cupola in which a great brass bell reflected the first rays of the sun. She was there, or maybe she wasn't. It seemed impossible she wouldn't have sensed that this was the moment and the place for us to meet.

I walked up to the house, to the terrace that overlooked the sloping gardens. There were two especially grotesque gargoyles at the ends of a stone wall, spewing water into a marble chute that emptied into a pool below. I stood on the wall to get a better view of the gardens which I hadn't seen for so long.

And I froze.

The water that ran down the

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chute was pure and clear, but the water in the pond at the bottom was clouded with the dark red of blood. Floating face down was the body of a man, naked except for a pair of swimming trunks. His hair waved away from his head like some sort of sea grass. There was a gaping red hole just below his left shoulder blade.

On the bank of the pond sat a girl. It was Laura, her blonde Alice-in-Wonderland hair hanging down her back and gleaming in the sunlight. She had on a flimsy thing in dark-blue polkadots that left her back bare and reached only halfway down her thighs. Her legs and feet were bare, and her knees were drawn up under her chin, her arms wrapped around them. She stared at the dead man without moving.

A yard or two away on the damp grass there was a large pair of pruning shears, the long-bladed kind used for cutting the boxwood hedges that surrounded the garden. The blades were stained. They had almost certainly been used to make that hole in the man's back.

"God Almighty!" I said, and jumped down off the wall.

I half ran, half slid down the grass bank to where Laura sat, her concentration on the dead man so intense that she didn't seem to hear my breathless arrival.

I squatted beside her, unable to speak, not daring to touch her. The dead man was a stranger to me. Blood still oozed slowly out of the hole in his back.

Then Laura turned her head toward me. She looked totally blank for a moment, as if she'd never seen me before in her life. Then her blue eyes widened and she recognized me. Two large tears ran down her cheeks. Her arms were suddenly around my neck, her wet cheek pressed hard against my cheek.

"Oh, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny!" she whispered.

A voice like thunder seemed to shake the ground under us.

"Palmer! Johnny Palmer!"

I turned my head, still holding Laura close. She was crying softly. Up above us, standing on the wall between the two spitting gargoyles, was T. J. Gibney, the Old Man himself. He looked like some giant Gothic warrior. At that distance you would never have guessed his seventy years.

Let the old tyrant just try to manhandle me this time. I could break him into a dozen small pieces without half trying. I had learned how to fight to kill in the Marine Corps . . .

The Gibney mansion in Lakeview was built more than 130 years ago by T. J. Gibney's grandfather. It had been owned by only three men in that time:

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Horace Gibney who built it; Nathan Hale Gibney, Horace's oldest son; and Thomas Jefferson Gibney, Nathan's heir, who had, the night before that red August dawn, celebrated his 70th birthday.

The fabulous old house was a museum containing priceless paintings and sculptures, rugs and tapestries, along with carved paneling and huge marble-manteled fireplaces. The entrance hall alone was big enough for an inaugural ball. In an age of self-help, a small army of servants, indoor and outdoor servants, kept the house, the gardens, the outlying grounds in perfect condition. It was the last of something—something that belonged in another era, another time.

When you think of vast fortunes in American history you conjure up such names as Carnegie, Mellon, Astor, Morgan, Rockefeller, Ford. And Gibney. The Gibneys had gone West in covered wagons, had become cattle barons, had found oil under their grazing lands, had bought more and more land—and then industries and portions of great cities and patents and processes. And now there was The Gibney Foundation which supported research in science and medicine, which underwrote the creative arts in a hundred cities, and was devoted to urban redevelopment—paying for the cost of obliterating city slums and replacing them with decent modern housing.

And that was far from all. There were hospitals that bore the Gibney name, and clinics and laboratories. To God they had contributed everything from stained-glass windows to whole cathedrals. Publically the name of T. J. Gibney was associated with goodness, charity, and compassion. And T.J. had a public-relations man whose only job was to keep that image intact.

Privately, and particularly in our small town, we knew T.J. to be a shrewd, cruel, hard-drinking, lusty old buzzard. There were a lot of people who admired just those qualities in him. Huge fortunes are not amassed and increased without violence, ruthlessness, and even treachery. The Gibneys had apologized to the people they'd crushed along the way by building hospitals to take care of their families.

I think what I had come to hate most about T. J. Gibney was not so much the way his family had amassed its fortune. That kind of thing was part of our pioneer history. It was how he used the power that went with great wealth. Maybe I should have thought he had treated me with some leniency seven years ago. From his point of view a beating

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was a small price for me to have paid. From my point of view—well, there had been no hearing, no chance to explain that Laura and I had not been involved in some cheap affair, no chance to explain that we were truly in love.

It had been simple for him to make any further contact between Laura and me impossible. He had servants who were paid well to make sure he had his way. He could pay a man in six figures to make his public image warm and lovable. And he could buy his way out of any jam he might ever get into . . .

As he started down the path toward where I sat on the edge of the pool with Laura in my arms I felt like shouting at him, "How are you going to buy your way out of this one, Old Man?"

Do you know that it never occurred to me that Laura could be involved? No, not Laura.

"What happened?" I asked her.

She shook her head from side to side, unable to speak because of what was now convulsive sobbing.

As the clean water came into the pond from the marble chute, the bloody film seemed to drift away from the dead man toward the outlet at the far end.

The Old Man came across the lawn toward us. He towered over me and for a moment all my adolescent fears of him rose up in me. He was Power. He was Authority.

"The last time you were on my land, John," he said in a shaking voice, "I told you what I would do if you ever came back. Just one thing. Did Laura invite you here?"

"No, sir," I said. I had learned to say "sir" automatically since our last meeting.

"You came here uninvited?"

"Have you looked in the pond, sir?"

"What about the pond?" He turned, and suddenly he turned to stone. After a long moment he looked back at me and his mouth had gone slack. "What happened?"

"I don't know, sir," I said, still holding the sobbing girl in my arms. "I only got here seconds before you called out to me. If you give Laura a chance to get hold of herself she should be able to tell us."

"Laura!" he shouted.

"Don't yell at her," I said.

He gave me an odd look as though he couldn't believe I had the nerve to give him orders. I put my head down and whispered to Laura, "We have to know, baby. We have to know what happened."

I could feel her whole body go tense as she struggled for control. Finally she lifted her tear-stained face, making no effort to get out of my embrace.

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"I don't know, Johnny," she said. She didn't look at the Old Man.

"You found him this way? You know who he is?"

"Of course she knows who he is," T.J. said. "He's Julian Traynor, a writer who's been living here for months and working on a history of the Gibney family. He's part of the household."

"I was coming to meet you, Johnny. I was going to the old place," Laura said, as if she hadn't heard T.J. "What time is it, Johnny?"

I could look at my wrist watch without taking my arm away from her. "A quarter to six," I said.

"Oh, my God!" she said, and began to shake again from head to foot.

"Easy," I said. "You can't start that all over again."

"I've lost an hour," she said.

T.J. and I looked at each other. We were suddenly allied in confusion.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I came out of the house about an hour ago," she said. "I planned to be at our meeting place a little before five—the way we always used to, Johnny. I came out onto the terrace and then—and then I was sitting on the edge of the pond here, looking at Julian."

"What did you see when you first came out on the terrace?"

She turned in my arms and her hands gripped the lapels of my blue linen jacket. "I don't know, Johnny. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I've lost an hour somewhere. I've drawn some kind of blank. I was on the terrace—and then I was sitting here."

"You expect me to believe that?" T.J. demanded.

"I don't expect anything from you, Father," Laura said. She put her face on my shoulder and the quiet weeping started again.

The Old Man straightened his massive shoulders. "Will you be good enough to help me get Julian out of the water, John?"

"You shouldn't touch him, sir—or those garden shears. It's a matter for the police."

"Oh, God," he said. He turned to look at the body in the water again. "You're sure he's dead?"

"I've seen a lot of dead men in the last two years, sir."

He looked at me as though he were really seeing me for the first time in his life. "So you have," he said. He watched me stroking Laura's golden hair. I thought he had shrunk just a little. "You believe she's drawn some kind of a blank? Amnesia?"

"If she says so," I said. "Something else I've seen in the last two years—a lot of memory blocks like this. When a man has seen something too horrible to bear, the mind simply shuts off all the memory processes relating to it. It's not at all uncommon

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when people are being blown to pieces all around you. If Laura saw someone ram those shears through Traynor's body—"

He nodded slowly. "Will you try to get her up to the house?" he asked.

Believe it or not, I had been asked to help T. J. Gibney! I watched him walk up the path, his broad shoulders drooping. The big stone house seemed to have taken on a reddish tinge from the sunrise. And as I watched I saw a curl of black smoke rising from one of the half dozen chimneys. It must have been in the high seventies at six o'clock that morning. It was going to be a scorcher of a day. I thought: no matter what happened the orderly efficiency of the household would go on. Someone must be burning refuse from last night's party in the incinerator.

Laura seemed to have regained control. She slipped out of my arms and sat there, looking first at the body in the pool, then at me.

"Johnny, get out of here," she said suddenly. "Go as far away as you can. I should never have said I might see you. It's gone, it's dead, it's our lost childhood. It's Dreamsville."

"An every-day all-day dream," I said.

"Oh, Johnny!"

"I want to tell you something," I said. "I was involved with Intelligence in the Marine Corps in Vietnam. Part of my job was to debrief our commandos when they came back from a raid, and prisoners who had been rescued from the Vietcong forces. Every day I talked to men who'd been through some kind of unbelievable hell. What's happened to you—a lost hour, even lost days—was a common thing. The mind provides a kind of anesthetic for the unbearable. You may not remember for a long time what you saw this morning."

"Oh, God." She covered her face with her hands.

"The harder you try, the more impenetrable the block is likely to be. So just take it easy. Sooner or later, unpleasant as it may prove to be, it will all come back to you. The police are apt to pressure you to remember. I'll try to get them to understand."

"The world isn't the way we thought it was, Johnny," she said. "It's nothing like what we thought. Go away, Johnny. Try to develop a block of your own. Try to forget you ever knew the Gibneys."

"I love you," I said, trying not to sound romantic. "I hope you're going to marry me."

Her body seemed to writhe inside that polkadot nothing she was wearing. She cried out, "No, Johnny! Oh, no, no, no!"

She sprang up, and before I could stop her she began to run

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barefoot up the path to the house. Above her the black curl of smoke from the chimney was subsiding. The sun was well up above the hills behind the house now, hot and oppressive. I could feel little trickles of sweat running down my back.

I looked down into the pool. A faint red froth seemed to float on the surface above the dead man.

Growing up is a strange business. Was it Mark Twain who said that as a boy he thought his father was a complete idiot, but by the time he was thirty he was surprised to realized how much his father had learned with the passing of the years?

The first time I thought I was grown up was that dawn by the trout stream when Laura and I discovered that we were in love. Right after that, when I'd crawled away whimpering, after the Old Man had beaten me, I knew I was still an inadequate kid. When I was 20 they put a rifle in my hands and sent me off to basic training and I thought: Now I am a man. But I learned I couldn't even vote and there were a lot of places where I couldn't even buy a drink. Some grownup!

And then I saw death and destruction—little children blown to pieces, old men and women burned to death; and I thought: you have to be grownup to see this and still retain your sanity. And then I thought: I couldn't be very grownup because I couldn't get it through my head exactly what we were fighting for. I couldn't think of any noble reasons for being in Asia where some sniper whom I didn't know and who didn't know me, someone I had nothing against, was trying to blow my brains out from behind a rock. I knew what *I* was fighting for. I was fighting to survive—so I could come home and find Laura.

So I had come home, having started as a private and ended as a Lieutenant with decorations and medals, and people on the streets of my town, seeing me in civilian clothes, said, "You're little Johnny Palmer, aren't you?" Grownup? I was still the same kid who lived with his mother and brother at the north end of Maple Road in Lakeview, Connecticut, U.S.A.

And Laura had run away from the simple mention of anything so grownup and adult as marriage.

In the pond a man lay face down, his dead mouth open in the bloodstained water. He had been born, lived, grown up, and died. Or had he grown up? The thousands of dead people I'd seen in the last two years had all seemed so helpless, so childlike in death . . .

Someone was coming down the path now, a blond man wearing

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a yellow sports shirt, yellow slacks, and yellow sandals on bare feet. He had a magnificent tan. He moved with the lithe grace of a conditioned athlete.

I knew he was Bob Gibney, Laura's brother—the younger of T.J.'s two sons, but ten years older than Laura. Bob was what the townspeople called "a wild one," as opposed to his brother Emerson who was a church deacon and whose owlish spectacles made him look like a third-rate bookkeeper. Bob Gibney drove *foreign sports cars, c l i m b e d* mountains, and had been saved from a dozen scandals with women by T.J.'s pocketbook. He had finally married a girl he found dancing naked in a cage in a Hollywood discothèque. Sheila Connors had obviously played for higher stakes, people said at first. She wanted the works, not a payoff. But later people had changed their minds. Bob and Sheila were apparently devoted to each other. They were never separated. They dressed alike, strictly on the "mod" side. Someone had dubbed them, "The Bobbsey Twins." But Bob Gibney hadn't settled down. He simply had a perpetual companion in his comet course across the sky.

He stopped at the edge of the pond, not looking at me for a few moments, and concentrated on the dead man.

"It took some strength to run those shears clean through him," he said.

"Frail people can generate a lot of strength if they're angry enough," I said.

Then he looked at me. He had the brightest blue eyes I can ever remember seeing—blue, laughing, heartless, I thought. "You said it, not me, brother," he said. "You're Johnny Palmer, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You seem to have chosen an unlucky moment to renew your *love life*," he said. "You see it happen?"

"No," I said.

"That's right, man," he said. "Keep saying no. B e c a u s e anything you say can be used against you."

"Now look here, Mr. Gibney—" I began.

"Call me Bob," he said, grinning at me. "There's only one *Mister* Gibney around here—the Old Man." He looked back at the body and his eyes seemed to grow even brighter, as though they were being provided with a special excitement. He glanced at an expensive gold wrist watch. "The last time I saw him was less than three hours ago," he said. "He was laying seige to one of the better looking broads of the evening. Oh, yes, Johnny, I was watching. There's a bit of the Peeping Tom in all males, wouldn't you say? That's why the

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new naked movies please us so much and outrage the lady critics. Oh, well, as the fellow said, 'What a way to go'—flushed with success, your manhood verified."

He fished a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and produced a gold lighter from his trousers pocket. He stared directly at me through the flame. "You should of stood in bed, kid," he said. "I think we should get up to the house. The fuzz will be along any minute."

"You're trying to tell me something," I said.

"A fact of life," he said. His smile was mockery. "You grew up in this town, didn't you, man? Then you know the Gibneys never take the rap for anything."

Someone hailed us from the top of the bank. It was startling, because it was Bob Gibney's double—or almost. Same yellow shirt and slacks and sandals, same lithe body; only the hair was different. It was cut almost the same. Bob wore his longish, with sideburns brushed back over his ears and a thick mane down his neck—but expertly cut and styled. I understand that kind of haircut costs about twenty-five bucks on Madison Avenue. Sheila Gibney's hair was styled the same way, but it was henna-red.

"I don't think I'll come down," she called out to us.

"Good idea," Bob said. "We're coming up, anyhow."

As we came close to her I saw that her eyes were bright, like her husband's, but cat-green. She looked at me quizzically. I've been sized up by women before, and I knew I wasn't displeasing to her; but I also knew Bob would notice it, and I felt uncomfortable.

"You're Johnny Palmer, aren't you?" she said. "I'm Sheila."

"Hi," I said.

"Poor Julian," she sighed. "He was riding so high last night. What's this about Laura's sudden amnesia?"

"Shock," I said.

She gave a little shudder. "I think I'd like to head out of town, Bob. After all, they don't need us. We were together, so we alibi each other."

"That's why I married you," Bob said. "To have a perpetual alibi. No, we'll have to stick around and tell the cops what we were doing."

The green eyes widened. "You mean, blow by blow?"

Bob laughed. "That might constitute a delaying action," he said. "Seriously, we have to stay, Duck—for Lydia's sake. She'll need support while T.J. tells the cops how to do their job."

Lydia was Laura's mother. People had remarked in town how odd it was the two boys had always called her by her first name. But if you saw her riding one of her hunters over a stone wall, or driving her Ferrari around

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town, her blonde hair streaming out behind her, you'd take her to be of their generation and not of her own.

As we walked toward the house I saw that a white-coated servant was laying out a sort of buffet breakfast on the screened terrace that faced the spitting gargoyles. The whole family must be up by now, even though it was still only a quarter past six. Sheila was between Bob Gibney and me, and she ran her scarlet-tipped fingers along the sleeve of my jacket.

"A rough reunion for you, Johnny," she said.

"Not exactly what I'd hoped."

"Laura was expecting you?"

"Yes, she was expecting me."

"Too bad you waited so long, Johnny. Our Laura isn't exactly the girl you once made love to on a morning like this—what was it, six years ago?"

"Seven years ago, and what are you talking about?" I said.

"Oh, come on, Johnny, don't play stupid," she said.

"Johnny's been in Vietnam for the last two years saving the world for Democracy—or whatever we're saving it for," Bob said.

"Don't tell me the local big-mouths haven't kept you filled in on our Laura," Sheila said.

"Oh, shut up, Duck," Bob said. He looked at me and grinned. "As a small girl Sheila used to stick pins in insects just to watch them wriggle."

"That's not fair," Sheila said. "I just thought Johnny ought to be prepared for what's bound to come out in the open. We don't want two cases of amnesia, do we?"

They both thought that was a hell of a joke. I was developing a slow burn but there was no chance for it to intensify, because we'd arrived at the terrace and Bob opened the screen door. Inside, the servant was in conference with Lydia Gibney. She was something. She had to be in her middle fifties because Bob was in his early thirties and Emerson a couple of years older. But you wouldn't have believed it if you didn't know the facts.

Her hair was a golden blonde, like Laura's and Bob's. Her shoulders were broad, her hips narrow. Her eyes were large, a darker blue than the children's, and she had a wide generous mouth. I suppose the hair was carefully tinted; I know the mouth was expertly painted. But the figure was a young woman's, and her skin was tanned but not leathery. I thought of a blonde version of the present-day Joan Crawford. Vitality and excitement radiated from her. She had been married to T.J. for at least 35 years and there was no sign that he'd been able to crush her. It was an experience just to look at her.

She turned to face us. A little

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nerve twitched under a high cheekbone. "You've seen—it?" she asked.

"It's not very pleasant darling," Bob said. "By the way, you remember Johnny Palmer?"

The dark blue eyes had an almost hypnotic effect on me. A kind of hardness faded from them and they became warm pools. She took a step toward me and held out her hand. Her grip was firm as a man's.

"I've owed you an apology for a long time, Johnny," she said. Her voice was low and husky.

"I can't think what for, Mrs. Gibney," I said.

"There was a time when I should have stood up for you," she said, "but I was too much of a coward. I hope this isn't the day I have to pay for that cowardice."

Cowardice was the last thing in the world you would connect with her. I supposed she meant she should have fought the Old Man over me. I could understand her holding back from that. He could crush you with sheer sound and fury.

There wasn't an opportunity for me to say anything because the Old Man and Emerson came out of the house to join us. T.J. had changed into a tent-sized seersucker suit, with a red ascot tied under his grizzled beard.

Emerson Gibney was as dark as his brother and sister were fair. His sports jacket looked as though it had been made for someone else. His dark eyes peered at me through horn-rimmed glasses, and they were openly hostile.

"Hello, Palmer," he said.

I said hello. I was still standing next to Lydia Gibney. "Is Laura all right?" I asked her.

"She's up in her room," Lydia said. "Marcia—Emerson's wife—is looking after her. Have you met Marcia?"

"No, I don't think so."

I heard Sheila laugh. "There's always something unexpected around the corner, Johnny."

"I think you should all have some coffee and something to eat," Lydia said. "The police will be here presently and heaven knows when we'll have another chance. Won't you help yourself, Johnny?"

The Old Man had crossed to the door and was looking out at the spitting gargoyles. "They're sending Zack along from the County Attorney's office," he said casually.

Bob echoed Sheila's laughter. "Didn't I tell you, Johnny? The Gibneys never take the rap for anything."

Manuel Zack.

Item: He was a former F.B.I. man.

Item: He had been involved in an antitrust case brought by the Government against the Gib-

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neys. At the trial he had failed to give the expected testimony. The Gibneys were acquitted.

Item: The F.B.I. dropped him immediately after the trial. He promptly got a job as special investigator for the Prosecutor's Office in our county. Everybody knew T.J. had used his influence. Manuel Zack was T.J.'s boy.

Item: Everybody said he was as mean as they come.

I had just got down a cup of coffee and half an English muffin with some grape jelly on it when the two green-and-white State Police cars wheeled up the driveway spraying bluestone onto the grass borders. Manuel Zack and a trooper wearing green-tinted glasses got out of the first car. Two more troopers with cameras and other equipment got out of the second car.

Zack, wearing a tropical worsted in charcoal-gray, came up the path to the terrace. His white shirt was unbuttoned at the neck and a red and blue striped tie was pulled loose and a little to one side. His egg-bald head was sunburned and peeling a little. He had a wide thin mouth like the edge of a carving knife. When his black eyes looked at you, you felt he could read the label on the inside of your shirt collar.

"Come in, Zack," T.J. said, opening the screen door. "Glad you could make yourself available."

"My pleasure," Zack said, looking quickly from face to face. He wound up glaring at me. "House guest?" he asked.

"John Palmer is a neighbor in the village, Mr. Zack," Lydia said.

Zack's eyes narrowed. "Oh, yes," he said. "Local war hero. You spend the night here, Palmer?"

"No."

"Then how do you happen to be here at this time of day?"

"I came to call on Miss Laura Gibney," I said.

"At six o'clock in the morning?"

It was Lydia who stepped into the breach for me. "Johnny and Laura were childhood sweethearts," she said. "They used to go on early-morning fishing trips in the old days. This was the first chance they'd had to meet since Johnny got back from the war. For sentimental reasons, I suppose, they chose to meet as they'd been accustomed to do when they were children."

Zack glanced at T.J. "He's the one you told me about?" he asked.

The Old Man nodded.

"So tell me what time you got here and how you came," Zack said to me.

"I walked," I said. "My family lives on Maple Road, which is less than a mile from the borders of Mr. Gibney's property. I came over the fence at the north end

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and walked through the woods and across the fields to the place where Laura and I used to meet. She wasn't there."

"So?"

"So I came up here to look for her, just outside there between the fountains. I saw Laura sitting on the bank of the pond. And I saw a body floating in the water."

"You didn't see anything happen? You didn't see this Julian Traynor before he was a dead body?"

"No. So far as I know I've never seen Traynor before that."

Zack dropped me for a moment. "You told me on the phone, T.J., that your daughter has some kind of memory block about what happened—what she may have seen."

"That's what she says," T.J. said.

"You have any reason to doubt it?"

T.J. drew a deep breath. "You know Laura's history, Zack. You helped look for her when she ran away from home. I don't know her any more."

I heard a sharp little intake of breath from Lydia. She was standing by the buffet table, a cup of coffee in her hand. The cup rattled slightly in the saucer. Emerson had wandered to the far end of the terrace as though he didn't want to be a part of this. "The Bobbsey Twins" were sitting on a wicker sofa, watching with a kind of bright excitement. I found myself thinking they looked like a couple of bloodthirsty spectators at a bullfight.

"Let's get this Traynor character straight," Zack said. "He's been living here for how long?"

"Nearly six months," T.J. said. He took a long thin cigar out of the breast pocket of his seersucker jacket and lit it. "He's doing—was doing—a history of the Gibney family. I spent several hours a day with him making tapes—talking into a tape recorder. He was just about ready to begin the actual writing."

"Get along well with everyone?"

T.J. looked around at his family. "Just fine," he said. "Nice fellow, pleasant sense of humor." He smiled a wry smile. "He stood up under my bullying very well. He'd come to seem like one of the family."

"I know he helped with your daughter when she was finally located in New York," Zack said. "Acted as a sort of go-between, didn't he?"

"She refused to see any of the family," T.J. said, his voice harsh. "There was nothing we could do about it—legally, that is. She's over twenty-one. Julian volunteered to talk to her—on Mrs. Gibney's behalf."

Lydia put down her unsteady coffee cup. "We had all made

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mistakes with Laura, knowingly and unknowingly," she said. Her wide eyes shifted to T.J. and quickly away again. "I wanted her to know that we still loved her, that nothing else mattered, that there'd be no recriminations, no demands. Julian went to New York to see her—four or five times before she agreed to let me talk with her. Julian had done a wonderful job, because when Laura and I met there were no barriers, no angers."

"'But she wouldn't see T.J.?"

"No. But I kept at her, hoping somehow that the wounds could be healed. I finally persuaded her to come here yesterday for my husband's birthday party. Julian drove in to New York and brought her out here."

"You think Traynor had romanced your daughter?" Zack asked.

"I don't know what you mean," Lydia said.

"We can't play this with gloves on, Mrs. Gibney," Zack said. "Your daughter has been carrying on with everybody in New York. We know that. Do you think Traynor's scalp was added to her list of trophies?"

There was a kind of giggling laugh from Sheila.

"I think I very much resent your way of putting things, Mr. Zack," Lydia said.

"Lydia, we've got to face the facts," T.J. said.

"Yes, facts, Mrs. Gibney," Zack said. "We have to believe that someone murdered Traynor in a rage, running him through with those shears. Of course we may get lucky. There may be some good clear prints on the handles of the shears, and that will be that. But I seldom get that lucky. So we have to consider who could have developed a murderous hatred for this nice young man who had come to seem 'like one of the family.' We don't know, at the moment, what your daughter's relationship with him was. And we don't know about Palmer here."

"I told you I'd never laid eyes on him," I said.

"Until this morning," Zack said.

"Until this morning when I saw him dead in the pond."

"So you say." Zack took a handkerchief out of his pocket and blotted his bald head. It was oppressively hot. "Just what was your current relationship with Laura Gibney? I know what happened seven years ago. You were lucky that T.J. didn't have your hide then. What about now?"

I could feel an angry pulse beating in my temples. "Since that time you're talking about I had never seen or had any contact with Laura until three days ago. I went to see her at the place in New York where she sings. She told me she was coming here

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yesterday for her father's birthday party. It was left that we'd try to meet sometime today."

"Did you live with her three days ago in New York?"

"No, you cheap jerk, I didn't," I said.

The knife-edge mouth widened in a satisfied little smile. I realized he wanted me to blow my top.

"But you planned to resume the old relationship when you met at the old place this morning?"

"I planned to ask her to marry me," I said, fighting for control.

"Oh, Johnny!" Lydia whispered.

"You and Laura Gibney had agreed to meet at the place where it all started?" Zack asked.

"No. We hadn't agreed to any time or place. I just thought she might—might come there."

"At dawn? After an all-night party?"

"Yes."

"But she hadn't actually promised?"

"No."

"Evidently she planned to meet *someone* at dawn," Zack said. "Suppose it could have been Traynor and not you?"

I was still fighting to keep my voice steady. "She told me that she'd started out to meet me—at the old place—where I'd expected her. And then she found herself sitting on the edge of the pond staring at Traynor's dead body."

"And you bought that?" He looked around at the others. "You all bought it?"

No one spoke. Zack came back to me.

"This girl you say you want to marry," he said. "If you saw her run a man through with a pair of garden shears, would you admit you saw it?"

I just stared at him.

"And if you caught her with Traynor and you killed him—you've been trained to kill on the spot, haven't you?—would your girl friend tell on you, do you think?"

When I didn't answer he turned away from me with a little gesture of disgust and addressed himself to T.J. "In my experience," he said, "ninety-nine percent of all these sudden amnesia cases are fakes. I think I'd better talk to your daughter, T.J."

"Will you get Laura down here?" T.J. said to his wife.

I was wet all over with sweat. It was hot, but anger was mainly responsible for it. I saw what was happening, what Zack's and T.J.'s plan was. Laura, the black sheep of the family, and I were to be thrown to the wolves, one way or another.

I looked at the Old Man and I don't think I ever hated anyone so much in my life, not even that sniper behind a rock in a swamp in Vietnam. This was a man who never forgave. Laura

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had shamed him by her escape into Hippieland. She had further shamed him by her refusal to come meekly home and submit once more to his authority after she'd been found. She had shamed him long ago with me. Now she was to be thrown to the wolves—to Zack specifically. I was to be used any way that was convenient to implement that punishment. If I was destroyed in the Gibney stonecrusher, that would be only proper punishment for my adolescent crime.

Lydia had gone to find Laura. Zack had helped himself to a cup of coffee and a slice of cold ham made into a sandwich on homemade bread. He was a noisy chewer.

I went over to T.J. who had finished some kind of whispered consultation with the owlish Emerson and was now staring out across the lawn at the gargoyles.

"You're not going to let Zack put Laura through that kind of dirty-minded grilling in front of everyone, are you?" I asked him.

His strong white teeth showed in a bearded smile. "I'm going to let Zack handle this case in his own way," he said. "He's a top-flight investigator."

"I've had some experience with the kind of mental block that Laura has suffered," I said. "I've watched psychiatrists in the service handle dozens of cases. Zack's kind of pressure could prolong the block indefinitely. It might even do Laura permanent damage."

"When Zack needs your psychiatric skill I'll tell him to talk to you," T.J. said.

"I won't stand for it," I said.

His shaggy eyebrows rose. "*You* won't stand for it? You really are a presumptuous young twerp, Palmer."

Whatever I might have said—and I have to admit I was groping for words—was stalled by the arrival on the terrace of Laura, followed by Lydia and a woman I supposed to be Emerson's wife, Marcia. She was a tall bony young woman, with her hair drawn back in a severe knot at the nape of her neck, and she wore no makeup. She was like a Sunday School teacher I'd once had whom I remembered without pleasure.

Zack put down the remnant of his ham sandwich and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. I saw Sheila huddle closer to Bob on the wicker couch, her green eyes glittering. This was to be the main event for the *voyeurs,* I thought.

Laura had changed out of the polkadot shift. She was wearing a black cotton turtlenecked sweater, the sleeves rolled up above her elbows. There was a red miniskirt and matching red sandals. She looked at me as if I was the only person present

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she'd ever seen before. I felt my heart thump against my ribs.

"This is Mr. Zack," Lydia said to Laura. "He's in charge and he has to ask you some questions, darling."

"Sit down, Miss Gibney," Zack said, in a surprisingly gentle voice. "Have some coffee?"

"No, thank you," Laura said.

She sat down in one of the porch chairs facing Zack, her arms wrapped around her as though she were suffering some sort of internal pain.

"Your family tells me that you've drawn some sort of memory blank," Zack said.

"Yes." It was scarcely audible.

"Suppose you tell me what you do remember," Zack said. He watched her as he lit a cigarette.

"I got up shortly before five o'clock," Laura said slowly. "I was going to meet Johnny Palmer at the trout stream." She glanced at me.

"But Palmer says you had no specific date, no agreed-upon time or place to meet."

"That's true. But I was sure Johnny would be there."

"And he says he was sure you would be there," Zack said. "You two have some sort of special ESP with each other?"

"Perhaps."

"So you planned to go to the trout stream?"

"Yes."

"What changed your mind?"

She looked straight at him. "I don't know."

"Oh, come now, Miss Gibney, shouldn't we stop playing games?" Zack said.

"I came onto the lawn out there near the fountains," Laura said. "The next thing I remember is sitting on the edge of the pool, and Julian was—was dead in the water."

"My, my," Zack said, "how convenient not to remember what happened in between."

"It's torture not to remember," Laura said sharply.

"Maybe I can help you relieve that torture," Zack said. "Palmer had asked you to marry him, right? And you had things to straighten out before you could say yes, right?"

"I hadn't asked her to marry me," I said. "I told you I planned to ask her. I never got the chance—not till afterwards. I said then I hoped she was going to marry me. She couldn't have known about it beforehand."

"With all that ESP going for the both of you?" Zack's laugh was short. "Did you know Palmer was going to ask you to marry him, Miss Gibney?"

Laura's china-blue eyes rested on me for a moment. "Yes, I knew he was going to ask me."

"And you had to straighten things out with Traynor before you could say yes?"

"I didn't have to straighten

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anything out with anyone," Laura said. "I was going to say no."

"You had to say no because you were already committed to Julian Traynor?"

"I was committed to no one," Laura said. She didn't look at me again.

"But you had an affair going with Traynor, didn't you, while he was being the diplomatic representative of your family?"

She took a frighteningly long time to answer, I thought. "I didn't have an affair with him," she said. Somehow it sounded evasive.

"I suggest you did," Zack said. "I think I could prove it if I have to. I suggest you planned to meet Traynor before you joined your friend Johnny at the trout stream. I suggest you and Traynor had an argument. I suggest you agreed to let Traynor have one more fling, or he tried to force himself on you. I suggest that Palmer, who'd gotten impatient, came up to the house to look for you and found you and Traynor together. I suggest he blew his stack, picked up the garden shears, and rammed them through Traynor. I suggest all that is what you so conveniently can't remember, Miss Gibney. I suggest it's best for you not to remember because there aren't many men who would want to marry you after Hippieville and Traynor and God-knows-who-else."

I was standing close enough to him to grab him by the shoulder and spin him around. I wasn't thinking about killing him. I just wanted to punish him. I hit him on the jaw with everything I had in my left and was ready to bring over the crusher with my right when I was swarmed on from behind by T.J. and Bob and Emerson.

Zack's face was a blur as he came toward me, smiling. While the others held me armlocked, Zack slapped me dizzy, back and forth with his open hand. Then he stepped back.

"Let him go," he said. His eyes were angry black gimlets. "They trained us in the F.B.I. how to hand-to-hand fight a killer. I think I know tricks they never taught you in the service, Palmer."

If T.J. and Bob, who were still holding my arms, had let go I'd have leaped at him. I wanted to wipe that smile off his mean face. It was Laura who changed things. She had come quickly to me, her cool fingers touching my cheek which must have been red from the slapping.

"Please, Johnny, please!" she said. "I can stand it if you can. What he says doesn't really matter."

The screen door slammed behind us. The trooper with the green-tinted glasses had come up from the pool. He took in the scene and his right hand rested

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lightly on his holstered revolver.

"You okay, Mr. Zack?" he asked.

"I'm just fine," Zack said.

"I think you better have a look at things down there before we move him," the trooper said.

It turned out that I knew this fellow with the sergeant's stripes on his shirt sleeve and the green glasses. He was a local. His name was Mike Sayers. He'd been two years ahead of me in school, college, and Vietnam. We'd never been chums, but we always said hello and exchanged small talk. He looked at me as though he'd never seen me before, with that deadpan expression the state troopers develop when they say, "Can I see your driver's license?"

Zack gave me a crooked smile. "So it's recess time, Palmer. But school's not out. Nobody's to leave the premises, and that goes double for you, war hero."

Zack and Sayers went out through the screen door and disappeared down the grass bank toward the pool. The atmosphere on the terrace was highly charged, and yet no one said anything for a moment. Emerson had joined his Marcia and they were whispering together in a far corner. Laura had turned away from me and was watching the disappearing law. "The Bobbsey Twins" still sat together on the couch, bright-eyed, watching eagerly. Lydia made a quick exit into the house, almost running.

The Old Man came over to the buffet table, cut himself a thick slice of ham, and popped an English muffin into the hotel-sized toaster. While he waited he turned toward Laura.

"Would you like to tell us what happened, Laura?" he asked in a flat voice.

She didn't speak or move.

"I've been in touch with my lawyer," T.J. said. "Maxwell's already on his way up from New York. I'll see to it you have the very best advice and help."

Laura whirled around. "So that the Gibney name won't be damaged, Father?"

"There isn't much more you can do to damage it," he said. "But we all have to stand together at a time like this."

"And the best way to stand together is to pin it on me or on Johnny or on both of us?"

"It would simplify matters if you'd stop pretending you don't know what happened," T.J. said.

"Has anybody ever had the courage to tell you, Father, that you're a miserable excuse for a man?" Laura said, her voice shaking.

The toaster made a popping noise. From the wicker couch came the sound of mocking applause, provided by Bob and Sheila.

"I think I'd like a little fresh

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air," Laura said. "Will you come with me, Johnny?"

She went out the screen door without waiting for me to answer. I followed her. She walked around the corner of the house in the opposite direction from the pool, past the sloping cellar doors.

There was a small flower garden surrounded by a two-foot stone wall that I remembered was Lydia's particular pleasure. I'd seen her in the early mornings when I was a kid. She'd be wearing a bright-colored smock, weeding and cutting. There were columbines with hummingbirds, tame as pets, already fluttering around the blossoms.

Laura sat down on the wall and behind her was a blaze of oriental poppies. She looked up at me, and her face was pale and her blue eyes were dark with pain.

"You're entitled to some sort of explanation," she said.

"There's nothing to explain," I said, "unless you want to." I sat down on the wall, facing her, and lit a cigarette. "I was an idiot to suppose you would even think of marrying me after all these years. It just happens that nothing has changed for me, but my life has been different from yours—fenced in by the disciplines of schools and war. There's been nothing new to change the way I've always felt about you."

"Dear Johnny, that was a very nice speech," she said. She reached out and touched my hand, then looked away across the scarlet bed of poppies. "I didn't change for a long time, Johnny. I loved you as totally as any young girl ever loves. I kept waiting for you to come back and—and carry me away. But you never did."

"I was a stupid kid. I was afraid."

"And rightly," she said "You've had a taste of how they operate this morning. I was a coward, too, Johnny. I knew they were intercepting letters and phone calls from you. I never had the courage to try to get in touch with you myself. I was literally a prisoner for so very long, Johnny. I knew what really mattered to T.J. All he cared about was the family reputation. Not even that really—he cared only about his own reputation. He kept insisting that the only reason he wasn't prosecuting you was to save *my* reputation, *my* future . . .

"I expected all the things I'd been brought up to expect—that you would be my husband, the father of my children, my whole life. This was every woman's dream, I'd been told, and I dreamed it. But month after month, year after year passed, and nothing happened. So I began to think it was all a phony."

She hesitated, then went on,

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"I watched my mother. Her dream had come true, I thought. She had her man—a big powerful man. She had her children, her home, her luxurious life. I watched her and I saw that it was all a phony. She was driven by anxieties and tensions I didn't understand, but I knew they were there. Everyone always said what a wonderful horsewoman she was, how daring, how expert. I began to realize that she was taking chances in the hope that some day she'd break her neck! The way she drove a sports car—and then the way she'd shut herself up for days on end and try to drink herself to death."

"Your mother?" I could hardly believe it.

"My mother," Laura said. "I began to realize that the greatest villain in the world was T.J. He had destroyed all of Lydia's romantic notions about living, he'd smothered Emerson and Bob, paying them off with gobs of money. We were all his puppets and we would do what he said whenever he chose to pull the strings."

"My God," I said.

"But even my father couldn't shut me away from the world like some Bronte heroine," Laura said. "There were newspapers and magazines and television and books. I was locked away from you and from life as I thought it was going to be, but I began to understand that out there a revolution was going on, Johnny—the revolution of the young people of my generation against the Establishment. It sounded like just words at first—fancy talk to justify throwing off discipline, to excuse self-indulgence in unheard-of freedoms. Then I began to believe in it. You were lost, Johnny—you and all the young men like you who were fighting a war that didn't mean anything—to me, an immoral war. You'd been sold a bill of goods, and there was a good chance you wouldn't live to find it out.

"I listened to T.J. raging about these perverted young people with their long hair and their beads and their crazy talk about Love and Peace—and then I heard a famous woman quoted as saying that all the crazy clothes and the long hair and the beards were simply a way of crying out, 'Look at us, listen to us—before it's too late!'

She glanced at me. "You don't believe a word of that, do you, Johnny? You fought your war for T.J.'s kind of world and you were lucky enough to come out of it whole; and now you're one of T.J.'s boys."

"I don't know," I said. "I would hate to think I am."

She drew a deep breath. "Well, Johnny, I joined the revolution. You know something? I was already old. I was past twenty-

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one." She laughed. "The kids I joined thought I was pretty long in the tooth, but I believed in them with all my heart. Not the rabble rousers and the building burners, but the kids who believed in Love and in Peace."

I saw that her hands were locked together in front of her, so tightly that her knuckles were bone-white.

"You don't have to tell me about it," I said. The truth was I didn't want to hear it.

"One of the things they believed was that living together was as natural a part of life as breathing or eating. It didn't have to be wrapped around with T.J.'s concepts of honor and decency and propriety. It was just a thing that people did and felt better for having done—without promises or pledges or long-range selectivity."

"So you lived that way," I said in a tight voice.

"Freely," she said, but without looking at me. "With almost anyone." She looked at me with a kind of pity in her eyes. "So you see, Johnny, why I had to say no if you asked me to marry you. You could never understand. You would try, but you would think of me just as T.J. thinks of me."

"No!"

"Poor Johnny. You know what's so terrible about it? When I saw you the other night in New York I had the crazy notion that I could wipe the slate clean and we could take up where we'd left off. I wanted to, Johnny. And then I realized I'd be walking right back into T.J.'s world. Worse than that, I'd already been tempted. I'd agreed to come back here for T.J.'s seventieth birthday before I knew you were back in the land of the living. I told myself that I'd come because Lydia wanted it so much. She hadn't been able to break away and I think I mean a great deal to her. I told myself I was being noble, but the truth, is, Johnny, I was tempted."

"By Julian Traynor?"

She looked at me with that same pity in her eyes. "Poor Johnny, you see how it would always be? Every man who ever looked at me would be a suspect."

"Was Traynor one of them?" I asked. "Can Zack prove it?"

"Do you know something, Johnny? Zack, with T.J. behind him, can prove anything. T.J., with an army of Zacks working for him, is our world today. They run our economics, our politics, our wars, our ghettos, our starvation areas. You cry out about injustice and the Zacks of the world, supported by the T.J.'s of the world, will prove beyond a doubt that you're actually protesting against Justice."

"What about Traynor?" I asked, with a dogged stupidity.

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"The T.J.'s of the world, with their Zacks, write our history. Their counterparts write all the other histories. They obliterate truth whenever it serves their interests." She gave a small mirthless laugh. "So much for my stump speech. No, Johnny, not Traynor, although he very much wanted it. You see, from where he sat I was a round heels, and therefore available. T.J. sits in that same seat, and God help me so do you, Johnny. I'm sorry if I've hurt you, but you had to know why there's no future for us. I've lived in another world with another set of values, and there's no way to make it match yours."

There was no time to protest, even if I'd known how to protest or been sure that I wanted to protest. Mike Sayers came around the corner of the house, his green-tinted glasses glittering in the sunlight.

"Back inside, please," he said.

I stood up, and every bone in my body seemed to ache. Laura stood very close to me. "Don't try to fight for me, Johnny," she said softly. "It's a battle you can't win—not against the likes of Zack and T.J." She kissed me on the cheek and I felt as if I'd been burned.

"You truly don't remember what happened this morning?" I asked.

"Before God, I don't," she whispered.

"Then I'll fight," I said.

I took her cool hand in mine and led her toward the terrace. We hadn't quite reached the corner of the house when I heard the sound of a heavy vehicle coming up the driveway. I turned and saw the red truck that belonged to the local sanitation department. They'd come to collect the trash and garbage. Then I remembered the dark smoke I'd seen coming from one of the chimneys.

What had someone been burning on such a hot day?

(continued on page 115)

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"Smiling fiercely, Merle began to jab pins . . ."

TILL DEATH DO US PART

by RICHARD MATHESON

SHE WAS ASLEEP NOW. MERLE lay stiffly on his side. Her ragged snoring set his teeth on edge; he couldn't stand much more of it. Still, he'd had to wait.

Moving very carefully he eased aside the bedclothes and stood up. His footsteps rustled on the carpeting. Entering the bathroom he switched on the light and opened the right sink drawer. He removed a pair of small scissors and returned to the bedroom.

He stood beside the bed for several minutes, gazing down at Flora with disgust. Good lord, she looked revolting. She may claim to be 42, but she was 50 if she was a day—gaunt, ugly, trying to fight the years with whiskey, makeup, red bleached hair, and long painted fingernails—and losing the battle hands down. One quality was all she had: money. He'd married her for that a month ago.

Now he meant to have it and be rid of her.

Leaning over the bed he carefully snipped away a lock of her hair and several fragments of nail. Flora stirred in her drunken sleep, making him flinch. Then she sighed, swallowed noises, and began to snore again. Pig, he thought, his youthful face curling with distaste.

Hastily he went back to the bathroom, put away the scissors, and switched off the light. He felt his way through the darkness to the hall door. Thank God that Flora had suggested separate rooms for sleeping. He would have gone demented otherwise. The thought of sleeping in the same bed with her, all night, every night, made him shudder.

He closed the door and hurried to his room. He simply had to shower, he felt so unclean. Dear God, how totally repulsive Flora was! How he'd managed to survive even a month with her he'd never know. Thank heavens he was not the violent type. If he were he might have strangled her a dozen times!

After he'd showered and donned his gold-colored pajamas, rubbed cologne on his face and throat and got into bed, he nudged a cigarette into his ivory holder, lit it, and began to work on the doll.

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It was almost finished—all he had to do was sew on Flora's hair and nails.

Done, he smiled and sighed. There, he thought. Freedom at last from that female ogre. Never again would he have to abide her cloying voice, her clumsy, dry-skinned touches, her whiskeyed breath, her barnyard g r u n t s. Another month of all that and he'd positively be gibbering!

Smiling fiercely, Merle began to jab pins into the doll's abdomen, back, and chest. Die, you harridan, he thought elatedly. Die! Die!

Flora snorted in her sleep and woke up with a start. She looked around the darkness of her room with half-shut eyes. After several moments she reached out groggily and felt the other side of the bed.

She smiled. Oh, good, she thought, switching on her bedside lamp. Putting aside the bedclothes she rose and weaved to the hall door, locked it clumsily, then staggered into the bathroom.

Standing in front of her dressing-table mirror she peeled off her eyelashes and removed h e r makeup. She smiled drunkenly at her reflection. Merle, oh, Merle, she thought. How she adored his attentions. Opening her mouth she tugged out her upper plate and dropped it in a glass of water. Merle was so romantic, so exciting. Flora reached up and skinned back her wig, pulling it off.

She pouted momentarily at the sight of her pale bald head, then shrugged, and, giggling, turned out the light and stumbled back to bed. No matter. Merle would never know. She scratched her false nails on the bedsheet. How she loved to rake them down his back. Oh, Merle, she thought, and hiccuped loudly.

She just *knew* that it was going to last forever and ever!

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a TOMMY and TUPPENCE pastiche by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

In which Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, husband-and-wife proprietors and directors of Blunt's Brilliant Detectives, emulate a combination of "classical" sleuths—this time with some emphasis on H. C. Bailey's Dr. Reggie Fortune, but with a good deal less parody than is usually present in the stories about these two cheery criminologists . . . In "The Ambassador's Boots" the American Ambassador brings to the guiding geniuses of Blunt's Brilliant Agency a case with "no rhyme or reason in it." Who would want the "old bird's" boots? And for heaven's sake, why? . . .

THE AMBASSADOR'S BOOTS

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

"MY DEAR FELLOW, MY dear fellow," said Tuppence Beresford, as she waved a heavily buttered muffin.

Her husband Tommy looked at her for a minute, then a broad grin spread over his face and he murmured, "We do have to be so very careful."

"That's right," said Tuppence, delighted. "You guessed. I am the famous Dr. Fortune and you are Superintendent Bell."

"Why are you being Fortune?"

"Well, really because I feel like a lot of hot butter."

"That is the pleasant side of it," said Tommy. "But there is another. You will have to examine horribly smashed faces and extra-dead bodies a good deal."

In answer Tuppence threw across a letter. Tommy's eyebrows rose in astonishment.

"Randolph Wilmott, the American Ambassador. I wonder what he wants."

"We shall know tomorrow at eleven o'clock."

Punctually to the time named, Mr. Randolph Wilmott, United States Ambassador to the Court

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of St. James, was ushered into "Mr. Blunt's" office. He cleared his throat and commenced speaking in a deliberate and characteristic manner.

"I have come to you, Mr. Blunt—by the way, it is Mr. Blunt himself to whom I am speaking, is it not?"

"Certainly," said Tommy. "I am Theodore Blunt, the head of the firm."

"I always prefer to deal with heads of departments," said Mr. Wilmott. "It is more satisfactory in every way. As I was about to say, Mr. Blunt, this business has got my goat. There's nothing in it to trouble Scotland Yard about—I'm not a penny the worse in any way, and it's probably all due to a simple mistake. But all the same, I don't see just how that mistake arose. There's nothing criminal in it, I suppose, but I'd just like to get the thing straightened out. It makes me mad not to see the why and wherefore of a thing."

"Absolutely," said Tommy.

Mr. Wilmott went on. He was slow and given to much detail. At last Tommy managed to get a word in.

"Quite so," he said, "the position is this. You arrived by the liner *Nomadic* a week ago. In some way your bag and the bag of another gentleman, Mr. Ralph Westerham whose initials are the same as yours, got mixed up. You took Mr. Westerham's bag, and he took yours. Mr. Westerham discovered the mistake immediately, sent round your bag to the Embassy, and took away his own. Am I right so far?"

"That is precisely what occurred. The two bags must have been practically identical, and with the initials R.W. in both cases, it is not difficult to understand that an error might have been made. I myself was not aware of what had happened until my valet informed me of the mistake, and that Mr Westerhem—he is a Senator, and a man for whom I have a great admiration—had sent round for his bag and returned mine."

"Then I don't see—"

"But you will see. That's only the beginning of the story. Yesterday, as it happened, I ran into Senator Westerham, and I happened to mention the matter to him jestingly. To my great surprise he did not seem to know what I was talking about, and when I explained, he denied the story absolutely. He had not taken my bag off the ship in mistake for his own—in fact, he had not traveled with such an article."

"What an extraordinary thing!"

"Mr. Blunt, it *is* an extraordinary thing. There seems no rhyme or reason in it. Why, if anyone wanted to steal my bag, he could do so easily enough without resorting to all this

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runaround! And anyway, it was *not* stolen, but returned to me. On the other hand, if it was taken by mistake, why use Senator Westerham's name? It's a crazy business—but just for curiosity I mean to get to the bottom of it. I hope the case is not too trivial for you to undertake?"

"Not at all. It is a very intriguing little problem, capable as you say, of many simple explanations, but nevertheless baffling on the face of it. The first thing, of course, is the *reason* for the substitution, if substitution it was. You say nothing was missing from your bag when it came back into your possession?"

"My man says not. He would know."

"What was in it, if I may ask?"

"Mostly shoes."

"Shoes," said Tommy discouraged.

"Yes," said Mr. Wilmott "Shoes. Odd, isn't it?"

"You'll forgive my asking you," said Tommy, "but you didn't carry any secret papers or anything of that sort sewn in the lining of a boot or screwed into a false heel?"

The Ambassador seemed amused by the question.

"Secret diplomacy hasn't got to that point, I hope."

"Only in fiction," said Tommy with an answering smile, and a slightly apologetic manner. "But, you see, we've got to account for the thing somehow. Who came for the bag—the other bag, I mean?"

"Supposed to be one of Westerham's servants. Quite an ordinary man, so I understand. My valet saw nothing wrong with him."

"Had it been unpacked, do you know?"

"That I can't say. I presume not. But perhaps you'd like to ask the valet a few questions? He can tell you more than I can about the business."

"I think that would be the best plan, Mr. Wilmott."

The Ambassador scribbled a few words on a card and handed it to Tommy.

"I guess you would prefer to go round to the Embassy and make your inquiries there? If not, I will have the man—his name is Richards, by the way—sent round here."

"No, thank you, Mr. Wilmott. I should prefer to go to the Embassy."

The Ambassador rose, glancing at his watch.

"Dear me, I shall be late for an appointment. Well, goodbye, Mr. Blunt. I leave the matter in your hands."

He hurried away. Tommy looked at Tuppence who had been scribbling demurely on her pad in the character of the efficient Miss Robinson.

"What about it, old thing?" he

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asked. "Do you see, as the old bird put it, any rhyme or reason in the proceeding?"

"None whatever," replied Tuppence cheerily.

"Well, that's a start anyway! It shows that there is really something very deep at the back of it."

"You think so?"

"It's a generally accepted hypothesis. Remember Sherlock Holmes and the depth the butter had sunk into the parsley—I mean the other way round. I've always had a devouring wish to know all about that case. Perhaps Watson will disinter it from his notebook one of these days. Then I shall die happy. But we must get busy."

"Quite so," said Tuppence. "Not a quick man, the esteemed Wilmott, but sure."

"She knows men," said Tommy. "Or do I say *he* knows men. It is so confusing when you assume the character of a male detective."

"Oh, my dear fellow, my dear fellow!"

"A little more action, Tuppence, and a little less repetition."

"A classic phrase cannot be repeated too often," said Tuppence with dignity.

"Have a muffin," said Tommy kindly.

"Not at eleven o'clock in the morning. Silly case, this. Boots—you know—why boots?"

"Well," said Tommy, "why not?"

"It doesn't fit. Boots." She shook her head. "All wrong. Who wants other people's boots? The thing's mad."

"Perhaps they got hold of the wrong bag?" suggested Tommy.

"That's possible. But if they were after papers, a dispatch case would be more likely. Papers are the only things one thinks of in connection with ambassadors."

"Boots suggest footprints," said Tommy thoughtfully. "Do you think they wanted to lay a trail of Wilmott's footsteps somewhere?"

Tuppence considered the suggestion, then shook her head.

"It seems wildly impossible," she said. "No, I believe we shall have to resign ourselves to the fact that the boots have nothing to do with it."

"Well," said Tommy with a sigh. "The next step is to interview friend Richards. He may be able to throw some light on the mystery."

On production of the Ambassador's card, Tommy was admitted to the Embassy, and presently a pale young man, with a respectful manner and a subdued voice, presented himself to undergo examination.

"I am Richards, sir, Mr. Wilmott's valet. I understood you wished to see me?"

"Yes, Richards. Mr. Wilmott

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called on me this morning and suggested that I should come round and ask you a few questions. It's this matter of the switched bags."

"Mr. Wilmott was rather upset over the affair, I know, sir. I can hardly see why, since no harm was done. I certainly understood from the man who called for the other bag that it belonged to Senator Westerham, but of course I may have been mistaken."

"What kind of man was he?"

"Middle-aged. Gray hair. I should say most respectable. I understood he was Senator Westerham's valet. He left Mr. Wilmott's bag and took away the other."

"Had it been unpacked at all?"

"Which one, sir?"

"Well, I meant the one you brought from the boat. But I should like to know about the other as well—Mr. Wilmott's own. Had that been unpacked, do you think?"

"I should say not, sir. I should say the gentleman—whoever he was—just opened it, realized it wasn't his, and closed it again."

"Nothing missing? No small article?"

"I don't think so, sir. In fact, I'm quite sure."

"And now the other one. Had you started to unpack that?"

"As a matter of fact, sir, I was just opening it at the very moment Senator Westerham's man arrived. I'd just undone the straps."

"Did you open it at all?"

"We just unfastened it together, sir, to be sure no mistake had been made this time. The man said it was all right, and he strapped it up again and took it away."

"What was inside? Boots also?"

"No, sir, mostly toilet things, I fancy. I know I saw some bath salts."

Tommy abandoned that line.

"You never saw anyone tampering with anything in your master's cabin on board ship, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Never anything suspicious of any kind?"

"And what do I mean by that, I wonder," he thought to himself with a trace of amusement. "Anything suspicious—just words!"

But the man in front of him hesitated. "Now that I remember it—"

"Yes," said Tommy eagerly. "What?"

"I don't think it could have anything to do with it. But there was a young lady."

"Yes? A young lady, you say, what was she doing?"

"She was taken faint, sir. A very pleasant young lady. Miss Eileen O'Hara, her name was. A dainty-looking lady, not tall, with black hair. Just a little foreign-looking."

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"Yes?" said Tommy, with even greater eagerness.

"As I was saying, she was taken faint. Just outside Mr. Wilmott's cabin. She asked me to fetch the doctor. I helped her to the sofa, and then went off for the doctor. I was some time finding him, and when I brought him back, the young lady was nearly all right again."

"Oh!" said Tommy.

"You don't think sir—"

"It's difficult to know what to think," said Tommy noncommittally. "Was this Miss O'Hara traveling alone?"

"Yes, I think so, sir."

"You haven't seen her since you landed?"

"No, sir."

"Well," said Tommy, after a minute or two spent in reflection. "I think that's all. Thank you, Richards."

"Thank *you*, sir."

Back at the office of the detective agency, Tommy reported his conversation with Richards to Tuppence who listened attentively.

"What do you think of it, Tuppence?"

"Oh, my dear fellow, we doctors are always skeptical of a sudden faintness! So very convenient. And Eileen as well as O'Hara. Almost too impossibly Irish."

"It's something to go on. Do you know what I am going to do, Tuppence? Advertise for the lady."

"What?"

"Yes. Any information respecting Miss Eileen O'Hara, known to have traveled on such and such a ship and such and such a date. Either she'll answer it herself if she's genuine, or someone may come forward to give us information about her. So far, it's the only hope of a clue."

"You'll also put her on her guard, remember."

"Well," said Tommy, "one's got to risk something."

"I still can't see any sense in the thing," said Tuppence, frowning. "If a gang of crooks get hold of the Ambassador's bag for an hour or two, and then send it back, what possible good can it do them? Unless there are papers in it they want to copy, and Mr. Wilmott swears there was nothing of the kind."

Tommy stared at her thoughtfully.

"You put these things rather well, Tuppence," he said at last. "You've given me an idea."

It was two days later. Tuppence was out to lunch. Tommy, alone in the austere office of Mr. Theodore Blunt, was improving his mind by reading the latest thriller.

The door of the office opened and Albert appeared.

"A young lady to see you, sir. Miss Cicely March. She says she is answering an advertisement."

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"Show her in at once," cried Tommy, thrusting his novel into a convenient drawer.

In another minute Albert had ushered in the young lady. Tommy had just time to see that she was fair-haired and extremely pretty when the amazing occurrence happened.

The door through which Albert had just left was rudely burst open. In the doorway stood a picturesque figure—a big dark man, Spanish in appearance, with a flaming red tie. His features were distorted with rage, and in his hand was a gleaming pistol.

"So this is the office of Mr. Busybody Blunt," he said in perfect English. His voice was low and venomous. "Hands up at once—or I shoot."

It sounded like no idle threat. Tommy's hands went up obediently. The girl, crouched against the wall, gave a gasp of terror.

"This young lady will come with me," said the man. "Yes, you will, my dear. You have never seen me before, but that doesn't *matter*. I can't have my plans ruined by a silly little chit like you. I seem to remember that you were one of the passengers on the *Nomadic*. You must have been peering into things that didn't concern you—but I've no intention of letting you blab any secrets to Mr. Blunt here. A very clever gentleman, Mr. Blunt, with his fancy advertisements. But as it happens, I keep an eye on the advertisement columns too. That's how I got wise to his little game."

"You interest me exceedingly," said Tommy. "Won't you go on?"

"Cheek won't help you, Mr. Blunt. From now on, you're a marked man. Give up this investigation, and we'll leave you alone. Otherwise—God help you! Death comes swiftly to those who thwart our plans."

Tommy did not reply. He was staring over the intruder's shoulder as though he saw a ghost.

As a matter of fact, he was seeing something that caused him far more apprehension than any ghost could have done. Up to now he had not given a thought to Albert as a factor in the game. He had taken for granted that Albert had already been dealt with by the mysterious stranger. If he had thought of him at all, it was as one lying stunned on the carpet in the outer office.

He now saw that Albert had miraculously escaped the stranger's attention. But instead of rushing out to fetch a policeman in good sound British fashion, Albert had elected to play a lone hand. The door behind the stranger had opened noiselessly, and Albert stood in the aperture holding a coil of rope.

An agonized yelp of protest burst from Tommy, but too late.

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Fired with enthusiasm, Albert flung a loop of rope over the intruder's head and jerked him backward off his feet.

The inevitable happened. The pistol went off with a roar and Tommy felt the bullet scorch his ear in passing, before it buried itself in the plaster behind him.

"I've got him, sir," c r i e d Albert, flushed with t r i u m p h. "I've lassoed him. I've b e e n practising with a lasso in my spare time, sir. Can you give me a hand? He's very violent."

Tommy hastened to his faithful henchman's assistance, mentally determining that Albert should have no further spare time.

"You damned idiot," he said. "Why didn't you go for a policeman? Owing to this fool's play of yours, he as near as anything plugged me through the head. Whew! I've never had such a narrow escape."

"Lassoed him in the nick of time, I did," said Albert, his ardor quite undamped. "It's wonderful what those chaps can do on the prairies, sir."

"Quite so," said Tommy, "but we're not on the prairies. We happen to be in a highly civilized city. And now, my dear sir," he added to his prostrate foe. "What are we going to do with you?"

A stream of oaths in a foreign language was his only reply.

"Hush," said Tommy. "I don't understand a word of what you're saying, but I've got a shrewd idea it's not the kind of language to use before a lady. You'll excuse him, won't you, Miss—do you know, in the excitement of this little upset, I've quite forgotten your name?"

"March," said the girl. She was still white and shaken. But she came forward now and stood by Tommy looking down on the recumbent figure of the stranger. "What are you going to do with him?"

"I could fetch a bobby now," said Albert helpfully.

But Tommy, looking up, caught a very faint negative movement of the girl's head, and took his cue accordingly.

"We'll let him off this time," he remarked. "Nevertheless I shall give myself the pleasure of kicking him downstairs—if it's only to teach him manners to a lady."

He removed the rope, hauled the victim to his feet, and propelled him briskly through the outer office.

A series of shrill yelps was heard and then a thud. Tommy came back, flushed but smiling.

The girl was staring at him with round eyes.

"Did you—hurt him?"

"I hope so," said Tommy. "But these foreigners make a practice of crying out before t h e y ' r e hurt—so I can't be quite sure about it. Shall we come back into my office, Miss March, a n d

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resume our interrupted conversation? I don't think we shall be interrupted again."

"I'll have my lasso ready, sir, in case," said the helpful Albert.

"Put it away," ordered Tommy sternly.

He followed the girl into the inner office and sat down at his desk as she took a chair facing him.

"I don't quite know where to begin," said the girl. "As you heard that man say, I was a passenger on the *Nomadic*. The lady you advertised about, Miss O'Hara, was also on board."

"Exactly," said Tommy. "That we know already, but I suspect you must know something about her doings on board that boat or else that picturesque gentleman would not have been in such a hurry to intervene."

"I will tell you everything. The American Ambassador was on board. One day, as I was passing his cabin, I saw this woman inside, and she was doing something so extraordinary that I stopped to watch. She had a man's boot in her hand—"

"A boot?" cried Tommy excitedly. "I'm sorry, Miss March, go on."

"With a little pair of scissors she was slitting up the lining. Then she seemed to push something inside. Just at that minute the doctor and another man came down the passage, and immediately she dropped back on the couch and groaned. I waited, and I gathered from what was being said that she had pretended to feel faint. I say *pretended*—because when I first caught sight of her she was obviously feeling nothing of the kind."

Tommy nodded. "Well?"

"I rather hate to tell you the next part. I was—curious. And also I'd been reading silly books, and I wondered if she'd put a bomb or a poisoned needle or something like that in Mr. Wilmott's boot. I know it's absurd—but I did think so. Anyway, next time I passed the empty cabin I slipped in and examined the boot. I drew out from the lining a slip of paper. Just as I had it in my hand I heard the steward coming, and I hurried out so as not to be caught. The folded paper was still in my hand. When I got into my own cabin I examined it. Mr. Blunt, it was nothing but some verses from the Bible."

"Verses from the Bible?" said Tommy, very much intrigued.

"At least I thought so at the time. I couldn't understand it, but I thought perhaps it was the work of a religious maniac. Anyway, I didn't feel it was worthwhile replacing it. I kept it without thinking much about it until yesterday when I used it to make into a boat for my little nephew

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to sail in his bath. As the paper got wet, I saw a queer kind of design coming out all over it. I hastily took it out of the bath and smoothed it out flat. The water had brought out the hidden message. It was a kind of tracing—and looked like the mouth of a harbor. Immediately after that I read your advertisement."

Tommy sprang from his chair.

"But this is most important. I see it all now. That tracing is probably the plan of some important harbor defenses. It had been stolen by this woman. She feared someone was on her track, and not daring to conceal it among her own belongings, she contrived this hiding place. Later she obtained possession of the bag in which the boot was packed—only to discover that the paper had vanished. Tell me, Miss March, you have brought this paper with you?"

The girl shook her head.

"It's at my place of business. I run a beauty parlor in Bond Street. I am really an agent for the Cyclamen preparations in New York. That is why I had been over there. I thought the paper might be important, so I locked it up in the safe before coming out. Ought not Scotland Yard to know about it?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Then shall we go to my beauty parlor now, get it out, and take it straight to Scotland Yard?"

"I am very busy this afternoon," said Tommy, adopting his professional manner and consulting his watch. "The Bishop of London wants me to take up a case for him. A very curious problem, concerning some vestments and two curates."

"Then in that case," said Miss March, rising, "I will go alone."

Tommy raised a hand in protest.

"As I was about to say," he said, "the Bishop must wait. I will leave a few words with Albert. I am convinced, Miss March, that until that paper has been safely deposited with Scotland Yard you are in great danger."

"Do you think so?" said the girl doubtfully.

"I don't think, I'm sure. Excuse me." He scribbled some words on the pad in front of him, then tore off the leaf and folded it.

Taking his hat and stick, he intimated to the girl that he was ready to accompany her. In the outer office he handed the folded paper to Albert with an air of importance.

"I am called out on an urgent case. Explain to his lordship if he comes. Here are my notes on the case for Miss Robinson."

"Very good, sir," said Albert playing up. "And what about the Duchess' pearls?"

Tommy waved his hand irritably. "That must wait also."

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He and Miss March hurried out. Halfway down the stairs they encountered Tuppence coming up. Tommy passed her with a brusque: "Late again, Miss Robinson. I am called out on an important case."

Tuppence stood still on the stairs and stared after them. Then, with raised eyebrows, she went on up to the office.

As they reached the street, a taxi came sailing up to them. Tommy, on the point of hailing it, changed his mind.

"Are you a good walker, Miss March?" he asked seriously.

"Yes, why? Hadn't we better take that taxi? It will be quicker."

"Perhaps you did not notice. That taxi driver had just refused a fare a little lower down the street. He was waiting for us. Your enemies are on the lookout. If you feel equal to it, it would be better for us to walk to Bond Street. In the crowded streets they will not be able to attempt much against us."

"Very well," said the girl, rather doubtfully.

They walked westward. The streets, as Tommy had said, were crowded, and progress was slow. Tommy kept a sharp lookout. Occasionally he drew the girl to one side with a quick gesture, though she herself had seen nothing suspicious.

Suddenly glancing at her, he was seized with compunction.

"I say, you look awfully done up. The shock of that man. Come into this place and have a good cup of strong coffee. I suppose you wouldn't hear of a nip of brandy."

The girl shook her head, with a faint smile.

"Coffee be it then," said Tommy. "I think we can safely risk its not being poisoned."

They lingered some time over their coffee, and finally set off at a brisker pace.

"We've thrown them off, I think," said Tommy, looking over his shoulder.

Cyclamen, Ltd. was a small establishment in Bond Street, with pale pink taffeta curtains, and a few jars of face cream and some cakes of soap decorating the window.

Cicely March entered, and Tommy followed. The place inside was tiny. On the left was a glass counter with toilet preparations. Behind this counter was a middle-aged woman with gray hair and an exquisite complexion who acknowledged Cicely March's entrance with a faint inclination of the head before continuing to talk to the customer she was serving.

This customer was a small dark woman. Her back was to them and they could not see her face. She was speaking in slow difficult English. On the right was a sofa and a couple of chairs with some magazines on a table. Here sat

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two men—apparently bored husbands waiting for their wives.

Cicely March passed straight on through a door at the end which she held ajar for Tommy to follow her. As he did so, the woman customer exclaimed. "Ah, but I think that is an *amico* of mine," and rushed after them, inserting her foot in the door just in time to prevent its closing.

At the same moment the two men rose to their feet. One followed her through the door, the other advanced to the shop attendant and clapped his hand over her mouth to drown the scream rising to her lips.

In the meantime, things were happening rather quickly beyond the swing door. As Tommy passed through, a cloth was flung over his head and a sickly odor assailed his nostrils. Almost as soon, however, the cloth was jerked off again, and a woman's scream rang out.

Tommy blinked a little and coughed as he took in the scene in front of him. On his right was the mysterious stranger of a few hours ago, and busily fitting handcuffs on him was one of the bored men from the shop. Just in front of him was Cicely March wrestling vainly to free herself, while the woman customer from the shop held her firmly pinioned. As the latter turned her head and the veil she wore unfastened itself and fell off, the well-known features of Tuppence Beresford were revealed.

"Well done, Tuppence," said Tommy, moving forward. "Let me give you a hand. I shouldn't struggle if I were you, Miss O'Hara—or do you prefer to be called Miss March?"

"This is Inspector Brace, Tommy," said Tuppence. "As soon as I read the note you left, I rang up Scotland Yard, and Inspector Brace and another man met outside here."

"Very glad to get hold of this gentleman," said the Inspector, indicating his prisoner. "He's wanted badly. But we've never had cause to suspect this place—thought it was a genuine beauty shop."

"You see," explained Tommy gently. "We do have to be so very careful! Why should anyone want the Ambassador's bag for an hour or so? I put the question the other way round. Supposing it was the *other* bag that was the important one. Someone wanted that bag to be in the Ambassador's possession for an hour or so. Much more illuminating! Diplomatic luggage is not subjected to the indignities of a Customs examination. Clearly smuggling.

"But smuggling of what? Nothing too bulky. At once I thought of drugs. Then that picturesque comedy was enacted in my office. They'd seen my ad-

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vertisement and wanted to put me off the scent—or failing that, out of the way altogether. But I happened to notice an expression of blank dismay in the charming lady's eyes when Albert did his lasso act. That didn't fit in very well with her supposed part. The stranger's attack was meant to assure my confidence in her.

"I played the part of the credulous sleuth with all my might—swallowed her rather impossible story and permitted her to lure me here, carefully leaving behind full instructions for dealing with the situation. Under various pretexts I kept delaying our arrival, so as to give you all plenty of time."

Cicely March was looking at him with a stony expression. "You are mad. What do you expect to find here?"

"Remembering that Richards saw some bath salts, what do you say we begin with the bath salts, eh, Inspector?"

"A very sound idea, sir."

He picked up one of the dainty pink containers and emptied it on the table. The girl laughed.

"Genuine crystals, eh?" said Tommy. "Nothing more deadly than bicarbonate of soda?"

"Try the safe," suggested Tuppence.

There was a small wall-safe in the corner. The key was in the lock. Tommy swung it open and gave a shout of satisfaction. The back of the safe opened out into a big recess in the wall, and that recess was stacked with the same elegant containers of bath salts. Rows and rows of them. He took one out and prised up the lid. The top showed the same pink crystals, but underneath was a fine white powder.

The Inspector uttered an exclamation.

"You've got it, sir. Ten to one, that tin's full of pure cocaine. We knew there was a distributing area somewhere round here, handy to the West End, but we haven't been able to get a clue to it. This is a fine coup of yours, sir."

"Rather a triumph for Blunt's Brilliant Detectives," said Tommy to Tuppence, as they emerged into the street together. "It's a great thing to be a married man. Your persistent schooling has at last taught me to recognize peroxide when I see it. Golden hair has got to be the genuine article to take me in. We will concoct a businesslike letter to the Ambassador, informing him that the matter has been dealt with satisfactorily. And now, my dear fellow, what about tea, and lots of hot buttered muffins?"

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James Raleigh had the heart and soul of a connoisseur of art. He specialized in genuine imitations—sculptures, paintings, and the like . . .

THE FACSIMILE SHOP

by WILLIAM JEFFREY

JAMES RALEIGH HAD JUST FINished stenciling with gilt spray paint the words *The Facsimile Shop* on the narrow front window when the two men came in.

Raleigh, a plump jovial man with silvering hair, wiped his hands on a chamois cloth and approached them, smiling politely. It was almost three o'clock now and they were the first customers of his first day. "Gentlemen," he said. "May I assist you?"

Neither man spoke immediately. Their eyes were making a slow circumspect inventory of the small shop, taking in the copy of Sesshu's Winter Landscape on the wall beside the door, the gold-painted, delicately amber-inlayed replica of Pectoral of Lioness from Kelermes, the fake gold and ivory Cretan Snake Goddess from the Sixteenth Century B.C., the imitation Egyptian Seated Scribe, of red-hued limestone—each of which, among other items, adorned the single row of display shelves in the center of the shop.

The taller of the two men, dressed in a conservative gray sharkskin suit and a pearl-gray snapbrim hat, picked up the Seated Scribe and rotated it in his hands. He had craggy features and a cleft chin, and he studied the synthetically ancient work of art with cool hazel eyes. After a moment he said conversationally, "Nice bit of craftsmanship."

Raleigh nodded, smiling. "Its prototype dates back to 2500 B.C."

The man looked at him quizzically. "Prototype?"

"Why, yes. You see, everything in my shop is a facsimile of the original *objet d'art*. I specialize in genuine imitations—sculptures, paintings, and the like."

"In other words, junk, Harry," the second man said affably. He wore a Glen Plaid suit that was cut too tight across the shoulders and a green felt hat with a small red feather in the band. His nose had been broken at one time and

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improperly set, and his ears were large and distended.

"Now, Alex," Harry said in a mild voice, "that's no way to talk."

"Sure," Alex said. He looked at Raleigh. "What's your name, pal?"

Raleigh did not particularly care for the man's tone, but he said, "James Raleigh. Really, gentlemen, if there is something I can—"

The man called Harry continued to study the Seated Scribe, frowning thoughtfully. Finally he glanced at the other man. "What do you think?"

Alex shrugged noncommittally.

"How much is it, Mr. Raleigh?"

"Forty-nine ninety-five."

"Alex?"

"Too damned expensive."

"I believe you're right," Harry said. He turned slightly, toward the display shelves, and then seemed to spread his hands, allowing the sculpture to fall at his feet. It shattered with a dull hollow sound on the hardwood floor.

Raleigh stared down at the shards, feeling heat rise in his cheeks. It became deathly quiet in the shop. At length he raised his head and looked at the two men; they returned his gaze steadily, expressionlessly.

"Why did you do that?" Raleigh asked slowly.

"An accident," Harry answered. "It just slipped out of my hands."

"I don't think so," Raleigh told him evenly.

"You don't?"

"No. I think you dropped it deliberately."

"Now why would I do a thing like that?"

"That's what I'm asking *you*."

Harry turned to the second man, Alex, and shook his head sadly. Then he produced a wallet from the inside pocket of his sharkskin suit and took a small white business card from it. He handed the card to Raleigh. On it were the words *Sentinel Protective Association* in black script. Below the words was an embossed drawing of a uniformed soldier with a rifle, standing at attention.

Harry said, "Accidents happen all the time to small businessmen such as yourself, Mr. Raleigh. There's nothing you can do to prevent them. But there *is* something you can do to prevent a lot of other costly business hazards—vandalism, burglary, wanton looting. This is a very bad neighborhood, you know—out of the way, poorly policed. The Sentinel Protective Association eliminates all such hazards here—all except, of course, simple accidents."

Raleigh smiled faintly. "And how much does the Sentinel Protective Association charge for this service?"

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"There is a membership fee of one hundred dollars," Harry said. "The weekly dues are twenty-five dollars, payable on Fridays."

"Suppose I choose not to become a member?"

"Well, as I told you, this is a very bad neighborhood."

"Very bad," Alex agreed. "Why, just last week poor Mr. Holtzmeier—he owns the delicatessen on the next block—poor Mr. Holtzmeier had his store all but destroyed by vandals in the middle of the night."

"I suppose Mr. Holtzmeier wasn't one of Sentinel's clients."

"He was," Harry said sadly. "But he had decided to discontinue our services only three days before the incident. An unfortunate decision on his part."

Raleigh moistened his lips carefully. "They call this kind of thing 'juice,' don't they?"

"Beg pardon?"

"These protective association shakedown rackets, like the one you're working here."

"I really don't have any idea what you're talking about, Mr. Raleigh. The Sentinel Protective Association was formed on behalf of the small businessmen in this neighborhood and it operates solely with their interests in mind."

"Of course it does," Raleigh said.

"May we put you down on our membership list?"

Raleigh did not answer at once. He glanced around the little shop; it was a comfortable old place, one that suited him perfectly, and the rent was moderate. The thought of being forced out of it was not an appealing one.

After a time he turned back to the two men. "Yes," he said slowly. "I haven't any choice, have I?"

Harry's expression was guileless. "I knew you were a reasonable man," he said.

"I suppose you'll want the money in cash?"

"Naturally."

"I can have it for you by noon tomorrow."

Harry shook his head. "We're awfully sorry, Mr. Raleigh, but we couldn't possibly offer you any protection until we receive at least a down payment on the membership fee."

Alex reached out to the display shelf and began to tilt to and fro a sculptured replica of the Eleventh Century Head of Divinity. "A lot of things can happen before noon tomorrow," he added meaningfully.

Raleigh sighed. "How much do you want now?"

"I think fifty dollars would be an equitable sum," Harry said. "A guarantee of your good faith."

Raleigh worried his lower lip for a long moment. Then he sighed again, in a resigned way, and said, "Perhaps it would be better

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if I paid one month's dues in advance, along with the membership fee. I certainly wouldn't want anything to happen unexpectedly."

The two men exchanged glances. Harry raised his eyebrows. "Why, that's very wise of you, Mr. Raleigh," he said. "Most prudent."

"Yes," Raleigh said. "I have some money in my safe. If you'll excuse me for a moment?"

"Certainly." The two men smiled.

Raleigh turned and disappeared through a door leading into a storage room at the rear of the shop. After several moments he emerged and stepped to the small check-out counter, where he placed ten twenty-dollar bills on the vinyl top. "Well, there you are," he said. "Two hundred dollars."

Alex came forward and quickly counted the currency. Then he nodded in satisfaction, put the bills into a leather executive wallet, and removed a receipt book and a ballpoint pen from his coat. Laboriously he wrote out a slip and presented it to Raleigh.

"Congratulations on becoming one of Sentinel's clients, Mr. Raleigh," Harry said. "You can rest assured that your cooperation is appreciated, and that you won't have any trouble whatsoever."

Raleigh nodded wordlessly.

"Goodbye for now, then," Harry said in a pleasant voice, and the two callers walked out leisurely.

As soon as they had vanished from sight, Raleigh hurried to the front door, locked it, and drew down the shade. Then he went quickly into the storage room.

He sighed a third time, wistfully now, as he set to work. It really was a very nice location—but then, he was reasonably certain, he would have little difficulty finding another quiet, side-street spot, perhaps in another state, where he could set up his Facsimile Shop—and the Old Heidelberg printing press that he was now beginning to dismantle.

He smiled only once during the lengthy task, and that was when he thought of the inferior-quality throwaways he had run off for testing purposes that morning; and of what would happen when the Sentinel Protective Association tried passing those particular genuine imitation twenty-dollar bills.

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a *NEW* murder story by

ROBERT McNEAR

A "curious" story—but what else would you expect from Robert McNear? However, you will have to find out for yourself just how "curious" this story is—it's the kind of story that cannot be discussed in advance of its reading . . .

And so to murder—premeditated, cold-blooded murder "according to their own prescriptions"—or, acrostically, **M***urder* **W***ith* **A***ccomplices . . .*

ANATOMY OF BODY DISPOSAL

by ROBERT McNEAR

GEORGE ASH STOOD AT THE window of the Hotel Majestic, the palm of his right hand resting flat on the streaked glass, his eyes following the beams of a car's headlights as the car turned into Clark Street. Fleetingly the lights brushed across the lower facade of the old hotel, touching briefly the main door where tiny dapper Johnny Pinto, who had been mucking around in beer where he shouldn't have been, had walked into a curtain of machine-gun bullets hung there by those who had held the territory. But then little Johnny, bloodied and forever bowed, had rated only modest newspaper space, for during Prohibition the genre of the fallen gangster made for the most ordinary news.

Considerably more news ink had been devoted to the hotel a decade later when a famous stage actor, after strangling his girl friend with a pillowcase, had taken the pillowcase with him to the closet, fashioned a clumsy noose with it, and had hanged himself from a clothes hook. Death came hard this way and his feet kicking the closet wall had alerted others in time to save the actor's life. After a trial they took him to the scaffold at Statesville Prison and made him perform for real . . .

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Ash removed his hand from the window and examined the palm coated with grime. "World War Two marked the downturn," he said aloud.

The war came and the neighborhood, straining for some time under the weight of change, went sour. The hotel's quality of premises and clientele declined in unison. Still, in wartime a room was a room, so business was good, especially by way of the military in search of a cheap flop, often with no questions asked. Consider the two sailors who came down for a holiday from the Great Lakes Training Center. One wonders what questions they asked themselves as they doused each other with gasoline and proceeded to turn themselves into a pair of steaks Diana, very well done.

After the war there was the case of the diamond salesman who was knifed to death by a person or persons unknown, and the policemen wondered what the well-dressed salesman was doing in so shabby a place. Through the lobby now came the drifters and bums and old people eking it out on Social Security, as well as the beatniks and finally, their latest variant, the hippies.

The last murder of note had happened two months before, about the time the city announced that it was buying the hotel and land and tearing the building down for urban renewal, when a teen-aged girl runaway, with dirty feet and naked under her mock nun's costume, allowed her hands to be tied behind her back and begged for the bullet that she took in the back of the head, execution style. The killer, a narcotics pusher, had gone promptly to the cop on the corner and reported his fierce freakout . . .

Seemingly pleased with the hotel's exceptional history of murder, George Ash turned from the window and smiled. He was a slender man about 45, quietly but expensively dressed. His smile was alternately illuminated and darkened by the old-fashioned sign outside of electric-light bulbs that spelled out the hotel's name.

"Well," George said, "what do we do with the body?"

"The body," echoed his wife Florence. She was sitting at a small table. Her hands in front of her played nervously with scars left in the wood by decades of careless cigarettes. She was much younger than her husband, and with her tanned skin and short white suit she seemed more dressed for tennis than for murder, "The body," she repeated. "Yes, George, we must do something."

"Murder is really a child's game," Ash said, joining her at the table. "Anyone can commit murder. No special intelligence or experience is required. But to successfully dispose of the body . . . that's the grand slam."

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"Grand slam," she said. "George, they start tearing this hotel down tomorrow. Doesn't that suggest something?"

"Not really. No matter what method they use in wrecking the place we can't be sure the body would leave here hidden under a ton of bricks."

"Hide it in the boiler or some other machinery in the hotel."

"Too risky. Scrap dealers will end up with all that stuff. We need a better idea. Let's be logical. The body must not be found in our lifetime."

"Lifetime." Slowly she raised her right hand like a student seeking attention. "I've got it, George. Coming home from work today, walking up Michigan Avenue, I passed the new insurance building, the one being dedicated tomorrow. Part of the ceremony will be the sealing of a time capsule filled with current mem—mem—"

"Memorabilia."

"Yes, memorabilia—to be opened *a century from now.*"

"Good thinking, Florence, you're using that pretty head of yours." And leaning across the table he slapped her face. "Now, listen, stupid. You're suggesting that we sneak down tonight and slip the body into some small box that will be sealed up tomorrow. A small box! Who the hell do you think we've murdered? A midget?" And his eyes fell on the body on the floor.

It was that of a young man with an athletic build and a vivid mop of blond hair. He wore sports clothes of undistinguished quality and cut, and lay grotesquely spreadeagled on his stomach, his head cruelly bent, his left hand clamped tightly over his eyes suggesting that at the terminal moment he had not wished to see what had come for him.

"You didn't have to slap me," she said sullenly, rubbing her cheek.

"We don't have time for silly games."

"You're all on edge, George, although God knows how many people you have murdered before."

"And you're not exactly a newcomer to this business either. Let's stay calm, Florence. We've got thinking to do. You know we live in an age of enormous technological strides. The moon's in our backyard now. Computers are almost as common as typewriters. Nuclear energy is—well, nuclear energy." He became silent.

"George, are you thinking of blowing up the body with an H-bomb?"

"Of course not! The thermonuclear explosion is only one aspect of nuclear energy. There are atomic power plants, Florence. Can you imagine what would happen to the body if we got it inside a reactor at one of

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those plants? Eventually the waste material from the reactor is drained off into steel drums and dumped off the North Carolina coast. How's that for a way to dispose of the body?"

"You want my honest opinion, George?"

"Naturally."

"I think it stinks," she said, slapping his face. "How do you get the body inside the reactor? And for that matter, where is this reactor? Why, you wouldn't know a reactor from a pocket flashlight."

"Florence, you lay a hand on me again and I'll open up your throat from ear to ear."

"Cool it, both of you," said the third person at the table, breaking his silence. Harry Temple was a big rumpled man about Ash's age and he had once been married to Florence. "Cool it, I say. Fighting among ourselves will get us nowhere. We have all murdered before and gotten away with it. As a matter of fact, we've made a damn profitable business out of murder." He consulted his watch, the most prestigious Swiss timepiece made. "We don't have all night. Our corpse is a perishable commodity like food and—"

"Food?" Ash said.

"What about food?" Florence asked.

"The eating of the corpse is not unknown in the annals of body disposal," Temple said.

"You mean you want *us* to eat him?" Florence asked, repugnance showing on her face.

"Humans have been known to eat their own victims," Temple continued. "But it is much more common for animals to do the eating of the murdered humans—rats, pigs, and chickens come to mind." He paused. "Animals," he said, turning his palms up, indicating that the solution was obvious.

"Be more precise—spell it out," Ash said.

"All right. Of all animals man has the most voracious appetite."

"Get on with it, Harry," snapped Florence.

"There's a slaughterhouse here in Chicago that specializes in what is called a commercial grade of chopped beef—a rather inferior grade, I'm afraid—used by franchised hamburger joints from coast to coast. It is not difficult to enter a slaughterhouse, especially at night. After we do a little butchering and mix the remains with some of the prepared product, we get out of there. Stationwagons loaded with grubby kids and their parents, from Maine to Arizona, from Oregon to Florida, will gobble up our friend on the floor."

"I know both of you very well," Florence said. "Harry, you can't carve a turkey, and you, George, can't clean a duck. You both may

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be expert murderers, but you're not butchers. And *I'm* not going to do any butchering. I think we were on a better track when we were talking about taking advantage of modern technology. Chemicals. How about chemicals?"

Temple rubbed the end of his nose, for him a characteristic gesture of contemplation, and turned toward the window to face a distant noise. A gentle rumble at first, it soon increased in scope and pitch until the old hotel seemed to vibrate from the sound waves. The roar peaked, began to fade, then fell off into a whine followed by silence as the jetliner, climbing over Lake Michigan, passed from sound.

"Airliners," Temple said, "have chemical toilets. At the end of each flight a truck comes around—aptly named the honey truck—and drains the toilet. You see what I'm getting at?"

Florence nodded. "Yes, I see. I also see the three of us at the ticket counter of the airport. 'Four tickets to Detroit, please. Our friend here isn't feeling so good—that's why we're carrying him.'" And she broke out into giggles.

Ash controlled his laughter. "'Our friend here complains of heartburn. Possibly the knife sticking into his chest has something to do with it.'"

"'But everything will be okay,' Temple went along with the gag, "'once we get him to the Men's Room.'" Throwing back his head he joined in the laughter, which now spread all around them.

Obviously enjoying the joke, Ash got to his feet and waited for the din to subside. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, when he could be heard, "I propose that the Body Disposal Workshop of the Mystery Writers Association now stands temporarily adjourned for drinks. One dollar per drink. Put your money in the bowl for each drink."

Mystery writers are notoriously a thirsty lot. The bar—really only a table with liquor, ice, and setups—immediately became the focal point for the chapter members and the workshop panel, George and Florence Ash and Harry Temple, who were not only the three most experienced and most widely published writers present but were also the chief officers of the group: president, vice-president, and secretary, respectively.

"Great spot for the meeting, George,'' congratulated one writer. "Considering all the blood spilled in this hotel through the years."

"We thought it would be appropriate," George grinned.

"Is the place really being torn down tomorrow?"

"Down it comes."

"Such realistic acting," said a

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mannish-looking woman. And then to Florence Ash, "Loved the way you slapped your husband."

"Play-acting," Florence said, giving her husband a weak smile, "But acting honors go to the body. By the way, where is Bromley?"

So dedicated were the assembled writers to soothing their parched throats that not one noticed that the person who had been simulating the body, Bromley Jones, a member in good standing, was still lying on the floor.

"Body," Florence called to Bromley, "come to the party."

"Have a drink, Bromley," said Temple.

"What an uncomfortable position that must be," observed one writer.

"Look at the angle of the head." said another.

"Least we can do is to make the corpse more comfortable," a member said facetiously, kneeling on the floor. Putting his hands firmly on the prone writer's ribs he pulled. Ungracefully Bromley Jones rolled over on his back, the head topped with blonde hair meeting the floor with the thud of a melon landing on the sidewalk.

One eye was closed tight. The other remained partially open, the eyeball turned around somehow in the socket so that only the white showed. At each corner of the closed lips a red rivulet had flowed. The blue shirt was no longer blue, and from a place approximately where the navel would be a knife protruded.

"George, you did murder him! You really *did,*" Florence said. Though delivered in a whisper her words cut through the room — the assembled writers, motionless, a *tableau vivant*—like a lash.

"I did not," George barked.

"You murdered him right in front of our eyes!"

"When I simulated the murder, Florence, I used a rubber knife. You know that."

"That's not a rubber knife sticking out of him."

"You, Temple," Ash said, swinging around to face the other member of the panel, "you did it. You helped simulate the murder. You killed him!"

"No, no, George. I didn't have a knife."

"You must have had."

"Not me."

"Then I've been framed," Ash shouted.

"You'll swing for this,'' Florence said hoarsely.

"George won't swing," said Temple. "The state of Illinois doesn't hang convicted murderers any more." In his mystery fiction Temple was known as a stickler for accuracy. "He'll get the chair."

"George will fry at the Cook County Jail," Florence said, a little wildly.

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"Not so, Florence," said Temple. "The electric chair has been moved down to the Statesville Prison. George will ride the lightning bolt down there." And in a tender gesture he took his ex-wife's hands in his.

"Why, why would I murder a hack writer like Bromley Jones?" Ash asked, his eyes roving plaintively from face to face.

"I am not a hack writer," Bromley said, sitting up. "George, I resent that."

"Only kidding," Ash said, sagging into the nearest chair. "Damn convincing performance, Bromley. You almost had me believing that you were—well, you know." With his breast pocket handkerchief George mopped his glistening brow. He raised his highball glass—his hand was shaking slightly—and drained it completely. When he put down the empty glass Bromley was standing in front of him.

"George, I demand an apology!"

"Told you. Only kidding."

"Is it because I publish only in paperback? That's why you called me a hack?"

Florence stepped in. "George was only joking, Bromley."

"Bromley just raised an interesting question," George said. "It's common knowledge that not one word of his has ever seen the inside of a hardcover book."

"Magnificent performance, Bromley," Temple said, trying to divert the subject to safer ground. "You came damn near fooling me."

"You didn't fool me, though you did a great job," Florence said. "Bromley, get yourself a drink. You've earned it."

"I do need a drink," Bromley said, and after favoring Ash with a frank look of loathing he went to the bar where he accepted congratulations on his performance from the other chapter members, none of whom claimed to have been really taken in by his *corpus delicti* charade, though their recent expressions had clearly suggested they had been.

At their prodding Bromley demonstrated the trick knife with the collapsible blade that he had substituted in his fall for the rubber one Ash had used, and described how he had planted the blood-red dye on his shirtfront and at the corners of his lips.

Seeming somewhat out of sorts, Ash went to the bar and fixed another drink, neglecting to do the same for his wife whose glass was now dry. He downed it hurriedly, making no pretense of the social amenities. It was evident that Florence didn't mind her empty glass—she was occupied talking with Harry Temple, and Ash could not hear what they were saying.

Abruptly Ash called the meeting to order. Members and panel

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promptly returned to their seats.

"I have a complaint," Bromley said, and with a hand gesture he encompassed the panel.

"What is it?" Ash said, not disguising his annoyance.

"When I was down on the floor you three were theoretically discussing ways of getting rid of my body—putting me in an atomic reactor and so on—all of which struck me as completely far-fetched and dumb as hell."

"I'm sorry, Bromley, that you find the Body Disposal Workshop dumb as hell, but I'm afraid you miss the real point. A craft session like this one is designed to increase our plotting skill. If you are writing a story and want to come up with a unique body-disposal method, start with something really far-out. Take the business of the atomic reactor. Frankly, I don't know the first thing about an atomic reactor, but I would research the thing, learn how it works, find out if there was a way a body could be placed inside, and what would actually happen to the body. If it turned out that a reactor represented a feasible method of body disposal, and body disposal was an important element in my story, perhaps I would have my murderer employed at the atomic plant. In that way he would have both the necessary knowledge of and accessibility to the means of disposal."

"I still think," Bromley said, "that we should discuss more practical methods—methods available to any of us."

Ash regarded his wife for a moment. "Florence and I have a sailboat that we keep up at Montrose Harbor. Last Saturday we went sailing. Near the Harrison Street water crib we were becalmed. While we were sitting there, one of the workers at the crib came out and talked. He showed us where the water entered the crib and where the filtering screens were located. Now, can you imagine a body floating around in Chicago's water supply? But to pull this off the murderer would have to have a boat to get out there and be a skindriver to remove the filtering screens."

"Interesting idea, George," Temple said, looking at Florence. "Now perhaps I can give you an example. I live in one of those buildings over there"—and he mentioned a nearby complex of concrete-and-glass apartment buildings. "The last issue of our monthly newsletter told about the new garbage-crushing machines that have been installed in the basements. But the same as with George's example of the water crib, you would have to have accessibility to the method and some knowledge of how it works."

Florence had paid close attention to her husband and Harry

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Temple. In the silence that followed Harry's idea she examined some notes in front of her. "Maybe now is a good time to see what other writers have done on the subject, and you may care to take notes. One of the more bizarre ways of disposing of a body is to seal it up somewhere. Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado,* as I'm sure you all know, is a classic example. But if you're interested in reading further along these lines, I suggest Balzac's *La Grande Breteche,* Algernon Blackwood's *Old Clothes,* and Edith Wharton's *Duchess at Prayer.* And in line with another method that has been suggested, there is Stanley Ellin's modern classic . . ."

Just as for the rest of us even the most fascinating of topics—sex or politics, say—eventually becomes boring, the mystery writers after a while tired of what to do with the body after the deed had been done. So when George Ash called the meeting adjourned, they said good night to each other and to the panel, and went their ways. Left behind, the panel proceeded to tidy up, emptying ashtrays and cleaning the makeshift bar. Apparently lost to private thoughts, each worked alone without benefit of conversation. Nor did they even look at each other.

There was stale cigarette smoke in the room. Ash went to the closed window. Florence followed. Then Harry Temple joined them. The window was stuck and the three of them worked together, Ash and Temple pulling up on the lower handles, Florence pushing at the top of the sill. At first the window opened grudgingly, then with a screech; the three homicide connoisseurs seemed pleased—as if the night's breeze from the lake made a difference in what was in the air . . .

The word resignation may be viewed on two levels. The first is the way the dictionary sees it, and that is the act of voluntarily giving up a position, usually for reason of health or to accept another posiiton offering greater opportunity. Secondly, the act may be of an involuntary nature—a euphemism for being fired. In some cases, the person involuntarily resigning is given a job that sounds more important but really isn't—a face-saving gesture known as "being kicked upstairs."

George Ash's resignation as the president of the Chicago chapter of the Mystery Writers Association was of the involuntary sort, standing as he was on the deck of his sailboat, misnamed *Lucky,* with no thought of resigning. A bullet, 9mm and Luger-fired, entering directly above the left eye, decided the matter. It is not known whether he was

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kicked upstairs or down—a question that only George and his Maker can now answer.

Naturally, this type of resignation could attract some attention, for it is both quite noisy and most illegal; but it occurred far out on Lake Michigan and at the time it was only recognized for what it was by the murderer and, fleetingly, George. Florence, his wife and the chapter vice-president, was in the boat's galley and did not hear her husband's "resignation." On reaching the deck with lunch, the position of chapter vice-president also became vacant.

Sailors spotted the floundering *Lucky,* and the Coast Guard towed the boat back to Montrose Harbor. A regrettable sailing accident, the news media reported. The Ashes, both well-known mystery writers, apparently had fallen from their sailboat. Their bodies, it was noted, would probably be recovered, for the lake usually gave up its victims. The lake, however, was not to be so generous this time . . .

At the next chapter meeting new officers were elected by the stunned membership. Following the meeting, as was the custom, it fell to the new president to write up a brief account of the gathering for the national monthly, *Evidence.* Generally such reports were a mixture of meeting events and news items about the members, but under the circumstances the new president believed that personal trivia was inappropriate. The report should take the form of a eulogy, reflecting the tone of the saddened chapter.

After slipping a clean sheet of bond paper into the typewriter, the fingers of the new president hung over the keys, poised while his mind sorted elements into order. The process completed, the fingers began to jump and the machine clattered into business.

"At our recent Chicago chapter meeting we all mourned the passing of George and Florence Ash, beloved and popular . . ." The rest of the paragraph contained what little was known of the unfortunate sailing accident, the personal backgrounds and writing achievements of the couple, and concluded with how their places would never be filled in the memories of their friends and fellow mystery writers.

Flipping the carriage to the left and indenting five spaces, the new president continued: "Further compounding the tragic event is the mysterious disappearance of Harry Temple. Known and loved by mystery fans everywhere, Harry was last seen in the garage of his apartment building. According to the parking attendant, Harry left his car and took the door leading to the service elevator. When later he missed

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several appointments, friends notified the Chicago police . . ."

As he had with the Ashes, the new president rounded out the Harry Temple affair with personal and professional information on the vanished writer, and expressions of sorrow from his colleagues.

The new president listed the three new chapter officers and then typed in his own name again in the lower right-hand side of the page: Bromley Jones

Folding the report and slipping it into an addressed envelope, he left the janitor's office in the basement, with its profusion of water- and heating pipes overhead and tools scattered about. The job had come to him with remarkable ease—a quiet conversation with a union official, an amount of money changing hands.

Moving soundlessly down the tunnel-like utility corridor he passed a door marked *KEEP OUT*. In the room behind the door a machine started up, a machine that was automatically activated whenever 200 pounds of material had collected. Painted a bright yellow, the Japanese-made device was compressing refuse into neat, easily disposable bales. Then Bromley passed through the door to the garage—the same door Harry Temple had passed through on the way to his rendezvous with the garbage.

On the other side of the garage Bromley's car was parked, the skin-diving equipment still in the trunk compartment. A pity but he must get rid of it, as well as the small motorboat. And of course give up his job.

Though Bromley tended to be a modest young man, he admitted to himself that he had planned and executed the triple murder with considerable finesse. Acquiring skindiving skills and purchasing a motorboat, he had followed the Ashes out into the lake. After shooting them both, he put the bodies in his boat, cast the Ashes' boat adrift, and waited until night to do what he must do at the water crib.

Causing Harry Temple's demise had required less cunning and less physical exertion. Once he had a janitor's job in Harry's own building, there had been only the question of familiarizing himself with the operation of the garbage crusher and waiting for the first opportunity.

From the outset there had been a special area of risk, one that Bromley had been fully aware of. Over and above the chance of being seen in the process of murdering or disposing of the bodies, there was the danger of the other mystery writers in the chapter knowing about George Ash's idea of the water crib and Harry Temple's idea of the garbage crusher. If the other mystery

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writers ever learned that Bromley had become skilled in skindiving and had bought a motorboat, if they ever learned that he had got a job as janitor in Harry Temple's building, the proverbial two plus two would emerge with consequences that Bromley didn't care to contemplate.

During the preparatory phases of the crimes Bromley had had two bad moments. One day in the garage Temple had passed by in his car very near where Bromley, dressed in his janitor's uniform, was sweeping; but there had been no sign of recognition from Temple. And one afternoon on the lake, after practising skindiving, he had been sitting on a rock with his mask off when the *Lucky* sailed by. On deck Florence and George were looking his way. Bromley had turned his face as quickly as he could, and there had been no hailing voices from the *Lucky*.

But now all danger was now behind him, Bromley thought, approaching the mailroom. The three were not talking any more. The three. The holy three. Year after year they had held the chapter's highest offices, had made the mystery best-selling lists, boasted of the biggest movie sales, taken the spotlight, flaunted their success. And where were they now, this trio of dustjacket stars? Dustjackets to dust... Two were bumping along in some underground main delivering water to a thirsty city. One was baled up snugly with nonreturnable bottles and cans and whatever else comes down the garbage chute. And all three had been disposed of according to their own prescriptions.

A fine irony there.

"Mail for you, Bromley," said the mailroom clerk.

He dropped his chapter report in an outgoing box. "Thank you," he said, taking from the clerk a buff manila envelope which had been forwarded on to him from his old address. The return address in the upper left-hand corner identified its contents: *Evidence. Mystery Writers Association*— with the organization's national-office address.

Moving away from the mail window, Bromley ripped open the envelope and turned to the section on the Chicago chapter. Dated two weeks after the session in the old hotel, it was George Ash's last report for *Evidence*.

Bromley read, "Thinking the atmosphere appropriate to the occasion, the meeting of the Chicago chapter took place in the old Majestic Hotel on the last night of the hotel's existence. Situated on the corner of Clark Street and North Avenue, the Majestic had been a long-time scene of murder..."

Following comments on the chapter meeting, there were some

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random news items—Ash's last prose. Bromley, already bored, scanned them hurriedly.

"Mary Jane Doheny is soon to marry. A lawyer from Milwaukee, we hear."

"Don Harrison is planning the annual chapter ski trip to Iron Mountain. Phone Don for date and details."

"Bromley Jones, according to Harry Temple, has taken a new job as engineer in the building in which Harry lives on LaSalle Street. Yours truly and wife saw Bromley skindiving in Lake Michigan recently. Seems like new work and new play for the prolific paperback author. Good luck, Bromley."

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a COLONEL MARCH detective story by

JOHN DICKSON CARR

RECOMMENDATION: *John Dickson Carr's (Carter Dickson's) "The Crime in Nobody's Room" was one of W. Somerset Maugham's favorite detective short stories. Certainly "The Crime in Nobody's Room" is one of Carr-Dickson's best short stories, and certainly this kind of detective short is being written by too few of the "old-timers" and by almost none of the "new-timers."*

So read and enjoy this "miracle problem" as investigated by Colonel March of "The Ragbag Department, D-3," which is known to some as "The Crazy House" but is better known to most of us as the Department of Queer Complaints . . .

THE CRIME IN NOBODY'S ROOM

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

BANDS WERE PLAYING AND seven suns were shining; but this took place entirely in the head and heart of Mr. Ronald Denham. He beamed on the car-park attendant at the Regency Club, who assisted him into the taxi. He beamed on the taxi driver. He beamed on the night porter who helped him out at his flat in Sloane Street, and he felt an irresistible urge to hand banknotes to everyone in sight.

Now, Ronald Denham would have denied that he had taken too many drinks. It was true that he had attended an excellent bachelor party, to celebrate Jimmy Bellchester's wedding. But Denham would have maintained that he was upheld by spiritual things; and he had proved his exalted temperance by leaving the party at a time when many of the guests were still present.

As he had pointed out in a speech it was only a month before his own wedding to Miss Anita Bruce. Anita, in fact, lived in the same block of flats and on the same floor as himself. This fact gave him great pleasure on the

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way home. Like most of us, Denham in this mood felt a strong urge to wake people up in the middle of the night and talk to them. He wondered whether he ought to wake up Anita. But in his reformed state he decided against it, and felt like a saint. He would not even wake up Tom Evans, who shared the flat with him—though that stern young businessman usually worked so late at the office that Denham got in before he did.

At a few minutes short of midnight, then, Denham steered his way into the foyer of Medici Court. Pearson, the night porter, followed him to the automatic lift.

"Everything all right, sir?" inquired Pearson in a stage whisper. Denham assured him that it was, and that he was an excellent fellow.

"You—er—don't feel like singing, do you, sir?" asked Pearson with some anxiety.

"As a matter of fact," said Denham, who had not previously considered this, "I do. You are full of excellent ideas, Pearson. But let us sing nothing improper, Pearson. Let it be something of noble sentiment, like—"

"Honestly, sir," urged Pearson, "if it was me, I wouldn't do it. *He's* upstairs, you know. We thought he was going to Manchester this afternoon, to stay a week, but he changed his mind. He's upstairs now."

This terrible hint referred to the autocrat of Medici Court, Cellini Court, Bourbon Court, and half a dozen other great hives. Sir Rufus Armingdale, high khan of builders, not only filled London with furnished flats which really were the last word in luxury at a low price; he showed his pride in his own merchandise by living in them.

"No special quarters for me," he was quoted as saying, with fist upraised for emphasis. "No castle in Surrey or barracks in Park Lane. Just an ordinary flat; and not the most expensive of 'em either. That's where I'm most comfortable and that's where you'll find me."

Considering all the good things provided in Armingdale's Furnished Flats, even his autocratic laws were not much resented. Nor could anyone resent the fact that all the flats in a given building were furnished exactly alike, and that the furniture must be kept in the position Rufus Armingdale gave it. Medici Court was "Renaissance," as Bourbon Court was "Louis XV": a tower of rooms like luxurious cells, and only to be distinguished from each other by an ornament on a table or a picture on a wall.

But Sir Rufus' leases even discouraged pictures. Considering that he was something of an art collector himself and had often been photographed in his own flat

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with his favorite Greuze or Corot, some annoyance was felt at this. Sir Rufus Armingdale did not care. You either leased one of his flats or you didn't. He was that sort of man.

Otherwise, of course, Ronald Denham's adventure could not have happened. He returned from the bachelor party; he took Pearson's advice about the singing; he went up in the automatic lift to the second floor; and he walked into what the champagne told him was his own flat.

That he went to the second floor is certain. Pearson saw him put his finger on the proper button in the lift. But nothing else is certain, since the hall upstairs was dark. Pushing open a door—either his key fitted it or the door was open—Denham congratulated himself on getting home.

Also, he was a little giddy. He found himself in the small foyer, where lights were on. After a short interval he must have moved into the sitting room, for he found himself sitting back in an armchair and contemplating familiar surroundings through a haze. Lights were turned on here as well: yellow-shaded lamps, one with a pattern like a dragon on the shade.

Something began to trouble him. There was something odd, he thought, about those lampshades. After some study it occurred to him that he and Tom Evans hadn't any lampshades like that. They did not own any bronze bookends either. As for the curtains . . .

Then a picture on the wall swam out of oblivion and he stared at it. It was a small dull-colored picture over the sideboard. And it penetrated into his mind at last that he had got into the wrong flat.

Everything now showed itself to him as wrong: it was as though a blur had come into focus.

"Here, I'm sorry!" he said aloud, and got up.

There was no reply. The heinousness of his offense partly steadied him. Where in the name of sanity was he? There were only three other flats on the second floor. One of these was Anita Bruce's. Of the others one was occupied by a brisk young newspaperman named Conyers, and the other by the formidable Sir Rufus Armingdale.

Complete panic caught him. He felt that at any moment a wrathful occupant might descend on him, to call him a thief at worst or a snooper at best. Turning round to scramble for the door he almost ran into another visitor in the wrong flat.

This visitor sat quietly in a tall chair near the door. He was a thin, oldish, well-dressed man, wearing thick-lensed spectacles, and his head was bent forward

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as though in meditation. He wore a soft hat and a thin oilskin waterproof colored green: a jaunty and bilious-looking coat for such a quiet figure. The quiet light made it gleam.

"Please excuse—" D e n h a m began in a rush, and talked for some seconds before he realized that the man had not moved.

Denham stretched out his hand. The coat was one of those smooth, almost seamless American waterproofs, yellowish outside and green inside; and for some reason the man was now wearing it inside out. Denham was in the act of telling him this when the head lolled, the smooth oilskin gleamed again, and he saw that the man was dead.

Tom Evans, stepping out of the lift at a quarter past one, found the hall of the second floor in complete darkness. When he had turned on the lights from a switch beside the lift he stopped short and swore.

Evans, lean and swarthy, with darkish eyebrows merging into a single line across his forehead, looked a little like a Norman baron in a romance. Some might have said a robber baron, for he carried a briefcase and was a stern man of business despite his youth. But what he saw now made him momentarily forget his evening's work. The hall showed four doors, with their microscopic b l a c k numbers, set some distance apart. Near the door leading to Anita Bruce's flat, Ronald Denham sat hunched on an oak settle. There was a lump at the base of his skull and he was breathing in a way Evans did not like.

It was five minutes more before Denham had been whacked and pounded into semiconsciousness; and to such a blinding headache that its pain helped to revive him. First he became aware of Tom's lean, hook-nosed face bending over him and Tom's usual fluency at preaching.

"I don't mind you getting drunk," the voice came to him dimly. "In fact, I expected it. But at least you ought to be able to carry your liquor decently. What the devil have you been up to, anyway? Hoy!"

"He had his raincoat on inside out," was the first thing Denham said. Then memory came back to him like a new headache or a new explosion, and he began to pour out the story.

"—and I tell you there's a dead man in one of those flats! I think he's been murdered. Tom, I'm not drunk; I swear I'm not. Somebody sneaked up behind and bashed me over the back of the head just after I found him."

"Then how did you get out here?"

"Oh, God, how should I know? Don't argue; help me up. I suppose I must have been dragged

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out here. If you don't believe me, feel the back of my head. Just feel it."

Evans hesitated. He was always practical, and there could be no denying the bruise. He looked uncertainly up and down the hall.

"But who is this dead man?" he demanded. "And whose flat is he in?"

"I don't know. It was an oldish man with thick glasses and a green raincoat. I never saw him before. Looked a bit like an American, somehow."

"Nonsense! Nobody wears a green raincoat."

"I'm telling you, he was wearing it inside out. If you ask me why, I'm going to bat my head against the wall and go to sleep again." He wished he could do this, for he could not see straight and his head felt like a printing press in full blast. "We ought to be able to identify the flat easily enough. I can give a complete description of it—"

He paused, for two doors had opened simultaneously in the hall. Anita Bruce and Sir Rufus Armingdale came out, in different stages of anger or curiosity at the noise.

If Evans had been more of a psychologist he might have anticipated the effect this would have on them. As it was, he stood looking from one to the other, thinking whatever thoughts you care to attribute to him. For he was an employee of Sir Rufus, as manager of the Sloane Square office of Armingdale Flats, and he could risk no trouble.

Anita seemed to take in the situation at a glance. She was small, dark, plump, and fluffy-haired. She was wearing a neglige and smoking a cigarette. Seeing the expressions of the other three, she removed the cigarette from her mouth in order to smile. Sir Rufus Armingdale did not look so much formidable as fretful. He had one of those powerful faces whose features seem to have run together like a bulldog's. But the old dressing gown, fastened up at the throat as though he were cold, took away the suggestion of an autocrat and made him only a householder.

He breathed through his nose, rather helplessly, until he saw an employee. His confidence returned.

"Good morning, Evans," he said. "What's the meaning of this?"

Evans risked it. "I'm afraid it's trouble, sir. Mr. Denham—well, he's found a dead man in one of the flats."

"Ron!" cried Anita.

"A dead man," repeated Armingdale, without surprise. "Where?"

"In one of the flats. He doesn't know which."

"Oh? Why doesn't he know which?"

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"He's got a frightful bump on the back of his head," said Anita, exploring. She looked back over her shoulder and spoke swiftly. "It's quite all right, Tom. Don't get excited. He's d-r-u-n-k."

"I am not drunk," said Denham, with tense and sinister calmness. "May I also point out that I am able to read and write and that I have not had words spelled out in front of me since I was four years old? Heaven give me s-t-r-e-n-g-t-h! I can describe the place."

He did so. Afterward there was a silence. Anita, her eyes shining curiously, dropped her cigarette on the autocrat's hardwood floor and ground it out. The autocrat seemed too abstracted to notice.

"Ron, old dear," Anita said, going over and sitting down beside him, "I'll believe you if you're as serious as all that. But you ought to know it isn't *my* flat."

"And I can tell you it isn't mine," grunted Armingdale. "There certainly isn't a dead man in it. I've just come from there, and I know."

If they had not known Armingdale's reputation so well they might have suspected him of trying to make a joke. But his expression belied it as well. It was heavy and lowering, with a suggestion of the bulldog.

"This picture you say you saw," he began. "The one over the sideboard. Could you describe it?"

"Yes, I think so," said Denham desperately. "It was a rather small portrait of a little girl looking sideways over some roses, or flowers of some kind. Done in that grayish-brown stuff; I think they call it sepia."

Armingdale stared at him.

"Then I know it isn't mine," Armingdale said. "I never owned a sepia in my life. If this man is telling the truth there's only one flat left. I think I shall just take the responsibility of knocking, and—"

His worried gaze moved down toward the door of the flat occupied by Mr. Hubert Conyers, of the *Daily Record*. But it was unnecessary to knock at the door. It opened with such celerity that Denham wondered whether anyone had been looking at them through the slot of the letter-box; and Hubert Conyers stepped out briskly. He was an unobtrusive, sandy-haired little man, very different from Denham's idea of a journalist. His only extravagance was a taste for blended shadings in his clothes, from suit to shirt to necktie; though he usually contrived to look rumpled. He was always obliging, and as busy as a parlor clock. But his manner had a subdued persuasiveness which could worm him through narrower places than you might have imagined.

He came forward drawing on his coat and with a deft gesture

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he got into the middle of the group.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," he began, seeming to propitiate everyone at once. "I couldn't help overhearing, you know. Good evening, Sir Rufus. The fact is, it's not my flat either. Just now the only ornaments in my sitting room are a lot of well-filled ashtrays and a bottle of milk. Come and see, if you like."

There was a silence, while Conyers looked anxious.

"But it's got to be somebody's flat!" snapped Sir Rufus Armingdale, with a no-nonsense air. "Stands to reason. A whole confounded sitting room can't vanish like smoke. Unless—stop a bit—unless Mr. Denham got off at some other floor?"

"I don't know. I may have."

"And I don't mind admitting—" said Armingdale, hesitating as everyone looked at him curiously. The autocrat seemed worried. "Very well. The fact is, *I've got a picture in my flat* something like the one Mr. Denham described. It's Greuze's *Young Girl with Primroses.* But mine's an oil painting, of course. Mr. Denham is talking about a sepia drawing. That is, if he really saw anything. Does this dead man exist at all?"

Denham's protestations were cut short by the hum of an ascending lift. But it was not the ordinary lift in front of them; it was the service lift at the end of the hall. The door was opened and the cage-grating pulled back, to show the frightened face of the night porter.

"Sir," said Pearson, addressing Armingdale as though he were beginning an oration. "I'm glad to see *you,* sir. You always tell us that if something serious happens we're to come straight to you instead of the manager. Well, I'm afraid this is serious. I—the fact is, I found something in this lift."

Denham felt that they were being haunted by that phrase, "the fact is." Everybody seemed to use it. He recalled a play in which it was maintained that anyone who began a sentence like this was usually telling a lie. But he had not time to think about this, for they had found the elusive dead man.

The unknown man lay on his face in one corner of the lift. A *light in the roof of the steel* cage shone down on his gray felt hat, on an edge of his thick spectacles, and on his oilskin waterproof. But the coat was no longer green, for he was now wearing it right-side-out in the ordinary way.

Anita, who had come quietly round beside Denham, seized his arm. The night porter restrained Tom Evans as the latter bent forward.

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"I shouldn't touch him, sir, if I was you. There's blood."

"Where?"

Pearson indicated a stain on the gray-rubber floor. "And if I'm any judge, sir, he died of a stab through the heart. I—I lifted him up a bit. But I don't see any kind of knife that could have done it."

"Is this the man you saw?" Armingdale asked Denham quietly.

Denham nodded. Something tangible, something to weigh and handle, seemed to have brought the force back to Armingdale's personality.

"Except," Denham added, "that he's now wearing his raincoat right-side out. Why? Will somebody tell me that? Why?"

"Never mind the raincoat," Anita said close to his ear. "Ron, you don't know him, do you? You'll swear you don't know him?"

He was startled. She had spoken without apparent urgency and so low that the others might not have heard her. But Denham, who knew her so well, knew there was urgency behind the unwinking seriousness of her eyes. Unconsciously she was shaking his arm. His wits had begun to clear, despite the pain in his skull; and he wondered.

"No, of course I don't know him. Why should I?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all. Ss-t!"

"Well, I know him," said Hubert Conyers.

Conyers had been squatting down at the edge of the lift and craning his neck to get a close view of the body, without touching it. Now he straightened up. He seemed so excited that he could barely control himself and his mild eye looked wicked.

"I interviewed him a couple of days ago," said Conyers. "Surely you know him, Sir Rufus?"

" 'Surely' is a large word, young man. No, I do not know him. Why?"

"That's Dan Randolph, the American real-estate king," said Conyers, keeping a watchful eye on Armingdale. "All of you will have heard of him: he's the fellow who always deals in spot cash, even if it's a million. I'd know those spectacles anywhere. He's as near-sighted as an owl. Er—am I correctly informed, Sir Rufus, that he was in England to do some business with you?"

Armingdale smiled bleakly.

"You have no information, man," he said. "And so far as I'm concerned you're not getting any. So that's Dan Randolph! I knew he was in England; but he's certainly not made any business proposition to me."

"Maybe he was coming to do it."

"Maybe he was," said Armingdale, with the same air of a parent to a child. He turned to

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Pearson. "You say you found him in that lift. When did you find him? And how did you come to find him?"

Pearson was voluble. "The lift was on the ground floor, sir. I just happened to glance through the little glass panel and I see him lying there. So I thought I'd better run the lift up here and get you. As for putting him there—" He pointed to the *Recall* button on the wall outside the lift. "Somebody on any floor, sir, could have shoved him in here, pressed this button, and sent him downstairs. He certainly wasn't put in on the ground floor. Besides, I saw him come into the building tonight."

"Oh?" put in Conyers softly. "When was this?"

"Might have been eleven o'clock, sir."

"Who was he coming to see?"

Pearson shook his head helplessly and with a certain impatience. "These ain't service flats, sir, where you telephone up about every visitor. You ought to know we're not to ask visitors anything unless they seem to need help or unless it's somebody who has no business here. *I* don't know. He went up in the main lift, that's all I can tell you."

"Well, what floor did he go to?"

"I dunno." Pearson ran a finger under a tight collar. "But excuse me, sir, may I ask a question, if you please? What's wrong exactly?"

"We've lost a room," said Ronald Denham, with inspiration. "Maybe you can help. Look here, Pearson: you've been here in these flats a long time. You've been inside most of them—in the sitting rooms, for instance?"

"I think I can say I've been in all of 'em, sir."

"Good. Then we're looking for a room decorated like this," said Denham. For the third time he described what he had seen, and Pearson's expression grew to one of acute anguish. At the end of it he shook his head.

"It's nobody's room, sir," the porter answered simply. "There's not a sitting room like that in the whole building."

At three o'clock in the morning a somber group of people sat in Sir Rufus Armingdale's flat and did not even look at each other. The police work was nearly done. A brisk divisional Detective-Inspector, accompanied by a sergeant, a photographer, and a large amiable man in a top hat, had taken a statement from each of those concerned. But the statements revealed nothing.

Denham, in fact, had received only one more mental jolt. Entering Armingdale's flat he thought for a second that he had found the missing room. The usual chairs of stamped Spanish leather,

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the refectory table, the carved gewgaws, greeted him like a familiar nightmare. And over the sideboard hung a familiar picture—that of a small girl looking sideways over an armful of roses.

"That's not it!" said Anita quickly.

"It's the same subject, but it's not the same picture. That's in oils. What sort of game do you suppose is going on in this place?"

Anita glanced over her shoulder. She had dressed before the arrival of the police; and also, he thought, she had put on more makeup than was necessary.

"Quick, Ron, before the others get here. Were you telling the truth?"

"Certainly. You don't think—?"

"Oh, I don't know and I don't care; I just want you to tell me. Ron, you didn't kill him yourself?"

He had not even time to answer before she stopped him. Sir Rufus Armingdale, Conyers, and Evans came through from the foyer and with them was the large amiable man who had accompanied Divisonal-Inspector Davidson. His name, it appeared, was Colonel March.

"You see," he explained, with a broad gesture, "I'm not here officially. I happened to be at the theater, and I dropped in on Inspector Davidson for a talk and he asked me to come along. So if you don't like any of my questions just tell me to shut my head. But I do happen to be attached to the Yard—"

"I know you, Colonel," said Conyers, with a crooked grin. "You're the head of the Ragbag Department, D-3. Some call it the Crazy House."

Colonel March nodded seriously. He wore a dark overcoat and had a top hat pushed back on his large head; this, with his florid complexion, sandy mustache, and bland blue eyes, gave him something of the look of a stout colonel in a comic paper. He was smoking a large-bowled pipe with the effect of seeming to sniff smoke from the bowl rather than draw it through the stem. He appeared to be enjoying himself.

"It's a compliment," he assured them. "After all, somebody has got to sift all the queer complaints. If somebody comes in and reports, say, that the Borough of Stepney is being terrorized by a blue pig, I've got to decide whether it's a piece of lunacy or a mistake or a hoax or a serious crime. Otherwise good men would only waste their time. You'd be surprised how many such complaints there are. But I was thinking, and so was Inspector Davidson, that you had a very similar situation here. If you wouldn't mind a few extra questions—"

"As many as you like," said

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Sir Rufus Armingdale. "Provided somebody's got a hope of solving this damned—"

"As a matter of fact," said Colonel March, frowning, "Inspector Davidson has reason to believe that it is already solved. A good man, Davidson."

There was a silence. Something unintentionally sinister seemed to have gathered in Colonel March's affable tone. For a moment nobody dared ask what he meant.

"Already solved?" repeated Hubert Conyers.

"Suppose we begin with you, Sir Rufus," said March with great courtesy. "You have told the Inspector that you did not know Daniel Randolph personally. But it seems to be common knowledge that he was in England to see you."

Armingdale hesitated. "I don't know his reasons. He may have been here to see me, among other things. Probably was. He wrote to me about it from America. But he hasn't approached me yet, and I didn't approach him first. It's bad business."

"What was the nature of this business, Sir Rufus?"

"He wanted to buy an option I held on some property in—never mind where. I'll tell you in private, if you insist."

"Was a large sum involved?"

Armingdale seemed to struggle with himself. "Four thousand, more or less."

"So it wasn't a major business deal. Were you going to sell?"

"Probably."

Colonel March's abstracted eye wandered to the picture over the sideboard. "Now, Sir Rufus, that Greuze, *Young Girl with Primroses.* I think it was recently reproduced, in its natural size, as a full-page illustration in the *Metropolitan Illustrated News?*"

"Yes, it was," said Armingdale. He added, "In—sepia."

Something about this afterthought made them all move forward to look at him. It was like the puzzle of a half truth: nobody knew what it meant.

"Exactly. Just two more questions. I believe that each of these flats communicates with a fire escape leading down into the mews behind?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Will the same key open the front door of each of the flats?"

"No, certainly not. All the lock patterns are different."

"Thank you. Now, Mr. Conyers—a question for you. Are you married?"

Hitherto Conyers had been regarding him with a look of watchful expectancy, like an urchin about to smash a window and run. Now he scowled.

"Married? No."

"And you don't keep a valet?"

"The answer to that, Colonel, is loud and prolonged laughter. Honestly, I don't like your 'social'

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manner. Beston, our crime news man, knows you. And it's always, 'Blast you, Beston, if you print one hint about the Thing-gummy case I'll have your hide.' What difference does it make whether I'm married or not or whether I have a valet or not?"

"A great deal," said March seriously. "Now, Miss Bruce. What is your occupation, Miss Bruce?"

"I'm an interior decorator," answered Anita. She began to laugh. It may have been with a tinge of hysteria; but she sat back in a tall chair and laughed until there were tears in her eyes.

"I'm terribly sorry," she went on, holding out her hand as though to stop them, "but don't you see? The murder was done by an interior decorator. That's the whole secret."

Colonel March cut short Armingdale's shocked protest.

"Go on," he said sharply.

"I thought of it first off. Of course there's no 'vanishing room.' Some sitting room has just been redecorated. All the actual furnishings—tables and chairs and sideboards—are just the same in every room. The only way you can tell them apart is by small movable things—pictures, lamp shades, bookends—which could be changed in a few minutes.

"Ron accidentally walked into the murderer's flat just after the murderer had killed that old man. That put the murderer in a pretty awful position. Unless he killed Ron too, he was caught with the body and Ron could identify his flat. But he thought of a better way. He sent that man's body down in the lift and dragged Ron out into the hall. Then he simply altered the decorations of his flat. Afterwards he could sit down and dare anyone to identify it as the place where the body had been."

Anita's face was flushed with either defiance or fear.

"Warm," said Colonel March. "Unquestionably warm. That is why I was wondering whether you couldn't tell us what really happened."

"I don't understand you."

"Well, there are objections to the redecoration. You've got to suppose that nobody had ever been in the flat before and seen the way it was originally decorated. You've also got to suppose that the murderer could find a new set of lamp shades, pictures, and bookends in the middle of the night—Haven't you got it the wrong way round?"

"The wrong way round?"

"Somebody," said March dropping his courtesy, "prepared a dummy room to begin with. He put in the new lamp shades, the bookends, the copy of a well-known picture, even a set of new curtains. He entertained Randolph there. Afterwards, of course, he

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simply removed the knick-knacks and set the place right again. But it was the dummy room into which Ronald Denham walked. That, Mr. Denham, was why you did not recognize—"

"Recognize what?" roared Denham. "Where was I?"

"In the sitting room of your own flat," said Colonel March gravely. "If you had been sober you might have made a mistake; but you were so full of champagne that your instinct brought you home after all."

There were two doors in the room and the blue uniform of a policeman appeared in each. At March's signal Inspector Davidson stepped forward. He said, "Thomas Evans, I arrest you for the murder of Daniel Randolph. I have to warn you that anything you say will be taken down in writing and may be used in evidence at your trial."

"Oh, look here," protested Colonel March, when they met in Armingdale's flat next day, "the thing was simple enough. We had twice as much trouble over that kid in Bayswater who pinched all the oranges. And you had all the facts.

"Evans, as one of Sir Rufus' most highly placed and trusted employees, was naturally in a position to know all about the projected business deal with Randolph. And so he planned an ingenious swindle. A swindle, I am certain, was all he intended.

"Now you, Sir Rufus, had intended to go to Manchester yesterday afternoon, and remain there for a week. Mr. Denham heard that from the night porter, when he was advised against singing. That would leave your flat empty. Evans telephoned to Randolph, posing as you. He asked Randolph to come round to your flat at eleven o'clock at night and settle the deal. He added that you *might* be called away to Manchester; but, in that event, his secretary would have the necessary papers ready and signed.

"It would have been easy. Evans would get into your empty flat by way of the fire escape and the window. He would pose as your secretary. Randolph—who, remember, always paid spot cash even if it involved a million—would hand over a packet of banknotes for a forged document.

"Why should Randolph be suspicious of anything? He knew, as half the newspaper-reading world knows, that Sir Rufus lived on the second floor of Medici Court. He had seen photographs of Sir Rufus with his favorite Greuze over the sideboard. Even if he asked the hall porter for directions he would be sent to the right flat. Even if the hall porter said Sir Rufus was in

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Manchester the ground had been prepared and Randolph would ask for Sir Rufus' secretary.

"Unfortunately a hitch occurred. Sir Rufus decided not to go to Manchester. He decided it yesterday afternoon, after all Evans' plans had been made and Randolph was due to arrive. But Evans needed that money; as we have discovered today, he needed it desperately. He wanted that four thousand pounds.

"So he hit on another plan. Sir Rufus would be at home and his flat could not be used. But, with all the rooms exactly alike except for decorations, why not an *imitation* of Sir Rufus' flat? The same plan would hold good, except that Randolph would be taken to the wrong place. He would come up in the lift at eleven. Evans would be waiting with the door of the flat open and would take him to a place superficially resembling Sir Rufus'. The numbers on the doors are very small; and Randolph, as we know, was so near-sighted as to be almost blind. If Evans adopted some disguise, however clumsy, he could never afterwards be identified as the man who swindled Randolph. And he ran no risk in using the flat he shared with Denham."

Anita interposed. "Of course!" she said. "Ron was at a bachelor party and ordinarily it would have kept him there whooping until two or three o'clock in the morning. But he reformed and came home early."

Denham groaned. "But I still can't believe it," he insisted. "Tom Evans? A murderer?"

"He intended no murder," said Colonel March. "But, you see, Randolph suspected something. Randolph showed that he suspected. And Evans, as a practical man, had to kill him. You can guess why Randolph suspected?"

"Well?"

"Because Evans is color-blind," said Colonel March.

"It's too bad," Colonel March went on sadly, "but the crime was from the first the work of a color-blind man. Now, none of the rest of you could qualify for that deficiency. As for Sir Rufus, I can think of nothing more improbable than a color-blind art collector—unless it is a color-blind interior decorator. Mr. Conyers here shows by the blended hues of brown or blue in his suits, shirts, and ties that he has a fine eye for color effect; and he possesses no wife or valet to choose them for him.

"But Evans? He is not only partially but wholly color-blind. You gave us a spirited account of it. Randolph's body was sent up in the lift by Pearson. When Evans stepped forward, Pearson warned him not to touch the body, saying that there was blood.

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Evans said, 'Where?'—though he was staring straight down in a small brightly lighted lift at a red bloodstain on a gray-rubber floor. Red on any surface except green or yellow is absolutely invisible to color-blind men.

"That was also the reason why Randolph's waterproof was put on inside out. Randolph had removed his hat and coat when he first came into the flat. After Evans had stabbed him with a clasp-knife, Evans put the hat and coat back on the body previous to disposing of it. But he could not distinguish between the yellow outside and the green inside of that seamless oilskin.

"You, Mr. Denham, let yourself into the flat with your own key—which in itself told us the location of the 'vanished' room, for no two keys are alike. I also think that Miss Bruce could have told us all along where the 'vanished' room was. I am inclined to suspect she saw Randolph going into your flat and was afraid you might be concerned in the murder."

"Oh, well," said Anita philosophically.

"Anyway, you spoke to a corpse about his coat being inside out; and Evans rectified the error before he put the body in the lift. He had to knock you out, of course. But he genuinely didn't want to hurt you. He left the building by way of the fire escape into the mews. He disposed of his stage properties, though he was foolish enough to keep the money and the clasp-knife on his person, where they were found when we searched him. When he came back here, he used the main lift in the ordinary way as though he were returning from his office. And he was genuinely concerned when he found you still unconscious on the bench in the hall."

There was a silence, broken by Armingdale's snort.

"But color-blindness! What's that got to do with the solution? How did you come to think the murderer must have been color-blind to begin with?"

Colonel March turned to stare at him. Then he shook his head, with a slow and dismal smile.

"Don't you see it even yet?" he asked. "That was the starting point. We suspected it for the same reason Randolph suspected an imposture. Poor old Randolph wasn't an art critic. Any sort of colored daub, in the ordinary way, he would have swallowed as the original *Young Girl with Primroses* he expected to see. But Evans didn't allow for the one thing even a near-sighted man does know: color. In his effort to imitate the decorations of Sir Rufus' flat the fool hung up as an oil painting nothing more than a sepia reproduction out of an illustrated weekly."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 346th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . an emotional "women's type" story, simply and sincerely told . . .

The author, Janelle Bailey, has written previously for denominational papers—mostly articles, puzzles, and quizzes. A year ago she resigned her position as secretary-bookkeeper at an automobile agency and started to write full time.

Mrs. Bailey did not go to college. But her local junior college began a schedule of evening classes and she enrolled in the Creative Writing Course—which undoubtedly helped her considerably.

Her family consists of a husband and, at the time of this writing, an eight-year-old son; also "a cat, a pony, a beagle, and a Dog." The Baileys live in the country where they raise their own fruits and vegetables. In the summer Mrs. Bailey is kept busy canning; in the winter she loves to sit by the fireplace and read—as she says, "to my heart's content." Her first story is that kind of story . . .

THE MAN OUT OF THE SNOW

by JANELLE BAILEY

EMILIE STOOD AT THE WINDOW watching the big downy flakes of snow float to the earth. This was the first winter she had spent in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky and this was the season's first snow. All day she had observed the growing accumulation with fascination. The stark bare hills were being transformed into polar giants that wore their white mantles with grave dignity. From her vantage point on the hillside Emilie could look down on the little village of Willow Crossroads. It, too, seemed to have taken on an air of nobility.

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As she looked up the valley she saw the snow begin to change into tiny stinging bits of ice that clung tenaciously to tree limbs and electric lines. Thus it had been most of the day—one minute the mood was lazy, hypnotic; the next it was a dashing, charging fury.

Reluctantly she left the window and went to stir the coal in the fireplace. Emilie, the pampered city girl, had been introduced to a totally new way of life when she married Arlin Eversole. But it had not taken her long to learn how to build a fire, carry out ashes, draw water, and bake corn bread and biscuits. Indeed, she enjoyed every minute of her new life and awoke each morning with a sense of adventure.

"You'd better go slow," Arlin cautioned her when he brought her to his home in the hills. "Mountain people don't take easily to 'foreigners.' You'll have to prove yourself first."

And so, while Arlin drove the hundred miles back to the seminary each week for his studies, Emilie stayed at home and sought to win the approval of the community. At times she thought she had been accepted and then an unknowing word, an unintentional gesture, or even a look put her right back where she had started.

They were a proud, sensitive people. So often feature writers had depicted them as lazy, ignorant hillbillies that they were suspicious of all strangers.

Emilie knew this and tried her best to show them she wanted to become one of them. For had she not married one of their native sons? When they were engaged Arlin had told her of his desire to return to the little church that had been struggling so long without a pastor, and Emilie did not hesitate. She told him she would go with him.

They were married in the fall and the following spring he took her home. During the summer months they worked together cleaning and painting the rather dilapidated church building. The very few members who had remained were delighted to help them.

When it came time for Arlin to return to school it was apparent that Emilie could not accompany him. For a baby was on the way. Each Monday morning Emilie kissed Arlin goodbye and immediately began looking forward to his return on Friday evening.

There is something about the coming of a baby that draws all women everywhere together. One by one the women found excuses to drop in on Emilie.

"Miss Emilie, I brought you some fresh butter," or "Here's a jar of blackberry jam you might enjoy," or "Reckon you could use this new quilt I made last winter?"

The baby was doing more to

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gain Emilie's acceptance by the community than anything she herself had done . . .

Darkness fell quickly on that first snowy day. Although Christmas was still almost two months away Emilie suddenly felt in the mood to listen to Christmas music. She placed some records on the phonograph and sat at the window in the fast-fading light.

She would never have admitted it to Arlin, but she had been afraid to stay by herself at first. As time passed, though, she became better acquainted with her neighbors and realized they were simple, honest country folk. Occasionally she even forgot Arlin's warning always to lock the doors.

When darkness finally hid the snowy landscape Emilie debated about what to do with the rest of the long evening that stretched ahead of her. Most of the sewing of tiny garments had been finished long ago, and the mending was all caught up.

Then she thought of all the nuts stored in the back room. There were sacks of walnuts, hickory nuts, and hazelnuts which she had gathered herself during the crisp fall weather. There was even a small sack of rare butternuts that one of the neighborhood boys had brought to her.

I'll crack nuts this evening, she decided. With all the holiday baking coming up I'll need plenty.

It was cozy sitting in front of the fire and cracking nuts on the hearthstone. She hummed along with the record:

"Good King Wenceslas look'd out,
On the Feast of Stephen;
When the moon lay round about,
Deep and crisp and even."

Emilie smiled to herself and planned all sorts of delicious concoctions to please Arlin. The phonograph played the last record and switched off. The contented silence of the room was broken by the tapping of the hammer as Emilie cracked nuts.

Outside the wind blew and occasionally a limb creaked under the weight of the snow and ice. My, I hope the electric lines don't break, she thought a bit worriedly.

Suddenly Emilie felt a blast of cold air hit her in the back and heard a footstep in the room. Then the front door closed gently.

The door! I forgot to lock it! Too late she remembered.

She whirled around and there stood Bryce Napier. She was too terrified to speak. She watched in horrified silence as the man purposefully removed his coat and cap and placed them across the back of a chair. He came to the fireplace and held out his hands to the warm glow.

Emilie tightened her grip on the hammer while things she had heard about this man raced through her mind.

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"Been bootleggin' for years, but always keeps one step ahead of the law." "Ain't nobody in the county got more money than Bryce Napier—and ain't nobody meaner."

She swallowed hard and tried to speak in a normal voice. "Wh-what do you want?"

Napier looked down at the pale woman who had unconsciously raised the hammer in a defensive pose.

Then he smiled disarmingly.

"No need to worry, Miss Emilie. Just thought you might be needin' a man around the house tonight."

Emilie replied stiffly, "No, thank you. I get along quite well by myself." It dawned on her that she must look rather ridiculous brandishing the hammer like a tomahawk. She put it down and arose heavily. "I said, 'No, thank you. I get along quite well by myself,'" she repeated with all the dignity she could muster.

Napier did not answer but took the hammer into his hands. He turned it over, studying it.

Oh, God! Emilie thought wildly. What does he intend to do?

Abruptly he started cracking nuts. "Why don't you pick 'em out while I'm doin' this?" he said without raising his head.

Wordlessly Emilie moved to obey him. She pulled her chair a little nearer the fireplace, ostensibly to be closer to the lamp in the corner—but she had in mind the poker standing at the edge of the hearth.

The minutes dragged by. Napier had not spoken another word to her and Emilie sat mutely picking the large luscious nutmeats out of the broken shells. One bowl had already been filled and the second one was almost full.

The wind howled around the house and from time to time Napier piled more coal on the fire. The first time he got up Emilie clutched her nut pick tensely and watched him out of the corner of her eye.

She caught her breath when she realized that the bulge in his hip pocket was made by a revolver. The shiny edge of the pearl handle peeked menacingly over the top of his pocket.

She had heard several tales about that pearl-handled revolver. Once, shortly after she came to Willow Crossroads, a man's body had been found lying in the road over the hill from the village. First evidence seemed to indicate a hit-and-run accident. But the Coroner found a small round wound in the man's body. Since the man, a stranger to the village, had been seen entering Bryce Napier's house the day before, the Sheriff decided to question him.

When he drove up he saw Napier's wife and sister burning trash out by the barn.

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"Napier around?" he asked as he strode across toward them.

"Uh, no. I mean, yes," Mrs. Napier said, hastily stirring the fire with a hoe.

"Well, is he here or not?" demanded the Sheriff.

"He's in the house," the woman replied glancing at him, then quickly looking away as she continued to poke the fire.

The Sheriff started toward the house when the shape of the burning trash struck him as being very odd.

"What's that you're burnin'?" he said, coming back to the women.

"It's just an old couch that was broken and worn out. We bought a new one and decided to get this one out of the way."

The Sheriff stood thoughtfully for a long moment watching the smoldering heap. Then he turned back to the house.

No one was ever able to prove anything. The stranger bore no identification and no relatives ever appeared to claim the body. Bryce Napier said he could shed no light on the mystery and so the case was dropped.

But the people of Willow Crossroads looked at each other knowingly. They shook their heads sadly and talked about the incident in quiet tones. *They* knew.

And now, as the tall muscular man stood before her, Emilie recalled the rumors she'd heard and her heart beat a little faster.

If I ever get out of this alive, she thought as she started to fill a third bowl, I don't want to ever see another nut as long as I live!

It was about 9:30 when they heard the first sound.

"Oh, dear! That must be a limb breaking in the big elm down the path!" she cried. For a moment she forgot her danger in her despair over the elm.

Then there were three more loud reports. Napier lifted his head and listened intently. He put the hammer aside and went to the door. The cold air swept into the room and Emilie shivered. But the man at the door stood with it open for some time. He peered into the darkness, listening.

He moved suddenly and Emilie jumped, but he did not look at her. He pulled on his coat and cap and stood in the doorway.

"If I were you," he said softly, "I'd keep this door locked." And he was gone as silently as he'd come.

Emilie sat stunned and confused. At last she commanded her legs to carry her across the room. With unsteady fingers she locked the door securely.

In a daze she went to the bedroom and prepared to retire. The wind was no longer blowing and an eerie silence filled the room spreading from corner to

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corner. She switched on the radio to chase away the stillness.

"... and now, news from our state," the announcer was saying. "After an intensive manhunt across the state today, 'Bad Don' Eversole was captured in a gun battle about 9:30 tonight. State police trailed him to Willow Crossroads where shots were exchanged and one officer was wounded. Eversole was shot in the shoulder. A tip from an unidentified caller led the police to him. He was said to be armed and dangerous. It is believed he was on his way to a cousin's house in Willow Crossroads."

Emilie's brush stopped in midair. She stared at her reflection in the mirror.

"He *knew!*" she murmured numbly. "Napier knew and that's why he came here!"

She dropped her head on the vanity table and sobbed in relief.

In a small village like Willow Crossroads it naturally wasn't long until everyone heard the story of the bootlegger's vigilance over the preacher's young pregnant wife when the preacher's outlaw cousin tried to come back. And no one was surprised when the preacher and his wife named their first son Bryce.

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Another down-to-earth, tell-it-like-it-is murder investigation by the man who came very close to being the inventor of the police-procedural story . . . William MacHarg, whose two major contributions to the genre are still not fully appreciated, deliberately fashioned a Basic English style to record the cases of Detective O'Malley. MacHarg rarely used a long or unfamiliar word, and the sentence structure, allowing for vernacular, is simplicity itself. But don't be misled: the stories are not soft—they are tough and terse and they reveal O'Malley—the smartest of all "dumb cops"—and the realistic policeman's lot with all the clarity of a literary candid-camera . . .

MURDER MAKES IT WORSE

by WILLIAM MacHARG

"WE GOT A HOT ONE," O'Malley said. "A lawyer knocked off in his office. Krockin, his name was. His secretary and a guy that worked for him was out, and he was alone in the office, and when they come back they found him shot."

"Have the police any theory about the case?" I asked.

"That's all we got—a theory. They think somebody in some law case pushed him off. This lawyer had a shady reputation. Cops found legal papers there and a lot of telephone numbers. They got the names in the papers and the telephone company give 'em who the phones belong to. Cops are going around to see them people. Identifications cops found a thumbprint on the dead guy's desk."

"Is it the killer's thumbprint?" I inquired.

"Why, we don't know who."

He had a small picture of the dead man in a thick envelope. The lawyer had been a little man, shrewd-looking and rather foppish.

"I'm supposed to work on this" O'Malley remarked, "but I don't know nothing to do."

The secretary and the young man who worked for Krockin were at headquarters. They had been brought there for questioning. The man was named Burkil. The girl's name was Miss Melton and she was young and quite pretty.

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"What ideas have you got about this murder?" O'Malley asked Miss Melton.

"None at all. I was out of the office. When I came back I found Mr. Krockin dead. I screamed and an elevator operator came. Then other people came and the building manager called the police."

"Who would want to kill the guy?"

"I don't know of anyone."

"Well, who'd he expect to see this morning?"

"He had no appointments."

"How about you?" O'Malley inquired of Burkil.

"I don't know anything. Mr. Krockin had sent me out to look up some records. When I came back the police were there."

We went to look at the office. Two rooms, high up in a big building, were luxuriously furnished. A cop was there to take the names of anyone who came to see Krockin.

"Anything happen here?" O'Malley asked him.

"Nobody come here. Some people phoned. I got their names." He gave us the names. "One lady wouldn't give her name, so I asked the telephone people could they trace the call, and it turned out they could. It come from a beauty shop, so I told 'em it didn't matter."

"You won't get no more phone calls. This crime is in the evening papers."

We inspected the inner office. Its windows looked out onto a courtyard. The police had carried away all the papers and the smaller furnishings. A small safe was still there.

"Could it have been robbery, O'Malley?" I asked.

"Sure, it could be anything. No gun was found here. The safe wasn't locked. Cops found only papers in it and the secretary don't know if there'd been anything else. The building employees didn't see nobody that could be the killer, and so many people get in and out them half dozen elevators there's no chance of getting a description of who got off at this floor. Let's go see that lady that wouldn't give the cop her name."

"It's a beauty shop," I objected.

"Sure. We might see some pretty ladies."

We went to the beauty shop. The lady we saw was very pretty indeed. Her name was Miss Hall and she conducted the shop.

"How come you phoned that lawyer Krockin?" O'Malley asked her.

"I didn't."

"Yeah, someone phoned from here."

"Some customer may have done it, but I don't know who."

"Okay."

We went back to headquarters.

"Well, there you got the case," O'Malley remarked to me. "We

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got nothing—and we keep on getting it. Let's call it a day."

I met him next morning.

"So what?" I asked.

"We got a few things. I don't think that secretary is telling everything she knows. That Krockin done a shady business. A lot of his cases never came to court; they got settled privately. Cops that went around and seen the people whose names was in his office report some of 'em claim they didn't even know the guy. We checked up that thumbprint. It wasn't the secretary's or that guy Burkil's, or any employee of the building, or any cop that had went there."

"Did you get anything more?"

"Sure. Them cops was pretty smart. They had a lot of pictures made of the dead guy, like the one I showed you, and put 'em in envelopes that would protect the surface. When they questioned anyone about Krockin, they give 'em one of the pictures to look at, and they held it in such a way the person had to make a thumbprint on it. You ever hear of a guy named Mr. Corvis?"

"I've heard of one," I told him. "He's an important man—the head of a big investment company. His son is a well-known polo player and there's been a lot printed about the family lately because his daughter is soon to be married."

"I'm supposed to see the guy."

"Was it his thumbprint?"

"That's right." O'Malley said.

We went and saw Corvis. We found impressive offices. Corvis was a big handsome man. The beautiful young girl whose picture was on his desk I knew must be his daughter.

"A cop seen you yesterday about that dead lawyer, Krockin, Mr. Corvis," O'Malley said.

"Yes."

"You told him you didn't know the guy."

"That is correct."

"How come, then, your thumbprint was on the dead guy's desk?"

"It wasn't."

O'Malley explained about the thumbprint. Corvis looked straight ahead and didn't say anything. "Is this a police trick?" he inquired at last.

"No, Mr. Corvis."

"Then it's a police mistake. Some other thumbprint must resemble mine."

"There ain't no two thumbprints in the world alike."

"Nevertheless, it's a mistake. I repeat, I didn't know Krockin. To the best of my knowledge I never saw the man, and certainly I never was in his office."

"This is a miserable affair, O'Malley," I declared unhappily, when we had left the offices. "The Corvises are a fine family. Of course, Corvis wasn't telling the truth, and he wouldn't deny being

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in Krockin's office if he were innocent."

"Why, innocent guys tells lies like other people."

Next day I didn't see O'Malley. I bought all the newspapers and I was surprised to find that Corvis' name wasn't even mentioned in them. There had been nothing in any of them about the thumbprint. I found O'Malley at headquarters the following day.

"Well," I exclaimed, "I see the Krockin murder never will be solved."

"Yeah? How come?"

"Corvis has too much influence."

"Don't kid yourself."

"Then why hasn't he been arrested?"

"Say, give us time. We're working on it. We been trying to find out what happened in Krockin's office that morning. It shapes up this way: Miss Melton come to work at her usual time of half-past nine. Burkil was in the office and Krockin come in a little later. At ten o'clock Krockin sent Burkil out to look up some records, the same as Burkil told us. At ten thirty he told Miss Melton to go out and stay out an hour."

"Why was that?"

"She don't know why. She says he done that sometimes. She never asked no questions but just figured someone was coming there she wasn't supposed to see."

"Of course!" I exclaimed. "Corvis was coming."

"Well, it might be that way. You'll maybe feel better when I tell you we've pinched Miss Melton."

"Now I know you're crazy!" I asserted. "Miss Melton didn't kill Krockin."

"Have it your own way. I got a place to go to. You might come along."

We went to a building not far from Krockin's office and went up on the roof, and then across a couple of other roofs, and down a short stairway into a small room where two cops sat wearing headphones.

"You boys getting anything?" O'Malley asked them.

"Not a thing."

"Let this guy listen in."

One of the cops gave me his headphone and I listened while O'Malley looked over the notes the cops had taken. I didn't hear anything important. A woman was making an appointment with her hairdresser.

"You ever do much thinking about beauty shops?" O'Malley asked me, after I had given back the headphone.

"What's that got to do with it?" I demanded.

"Why, ladies talk a lot in beauty shops. Some of 'em talk about things to their hairdresser they wouldn't have told to their best friend."

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"You better get this," one of the cops interrupted.

O'Malley listened, and put down the headphone.

"Come on," he told me.

We went but we didn't go anywhere. Instead, we stood so long on a street corner that I got thoroughly tired of it. Then I saw Miss Hall, the girl from the beauty shop, approaching. A plain-clothes cop was walking a little behind her, and when the cop saw O'Malley, he wiped his chin with his handkerchief, and O'Malley stopped Miss Hall and showed her his shield, and we all got into a cab. In the cab O'Malley opened Miss Hall's handbag and found $3000 in it.

"Sister," he said, "you've got yourself in trouble."

We took her to headquarters, and we found a woman there whom I hadn't seen before. She was pretty and seemed thirty-some years old, and the two women and a lot of cops went into the Interrogation Room and I was left in the corridor. O'Malley came to the door and spoke to me.

"I'll meet you at dinner."

I met him at seven o'clock.

"Well," he said, "this case come out about like we expected. Burkil killed Krockin."

"Burkil?" I echoed. "Why?"

"This was a blackmail ring. Krockin and Burkil and that beauty lady, Miss Hall, was the members of it. When some customer in Miss Hall's shop told something they could make use of. that beauty lady reported it to Krockin. Burkil, who one time had been a private detective, went round and looked the thing up. and if Burkil found enough to make a case out of, Krockin drew up the papers. There wasn't no idea of ever bringing them cases into court, but Burkil seen the guys and made 'em think they meant to prosecute. Then he suggested it could be settled if they saw Krockin.

"When they seen Krockin he told 'em it could be settled secretly for a certain amount of money, and a lot of them people paid rather than take the chance the charges might become public."

"I see," I said. "Then Corvis was one of those blackmailed."

"You got it. You seen the lady we had there at headquarters? Her name is Miss Darret, and she was one time an actress. Quite a few years ago her and Corvis was friends and they made a trip to Bermuda together. Corvis' daughter's engagement was in the newspapers, and Miss Darret was getting her hair dressed, and she made the remark to the hairdresser that she one time had knew Corvis and they had went on a trip. So Krockin drew up a complaint in Miss Darret's name against Corvis.

"Miss Darret didn't have no idea of making any trouble for

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Corvis, and she wouldn't have signed the complaint, but when Miss Hall made an appointment with one of her customers she had the customer sign the appointment. So she had all their signatures. Krockin forged Miss Darret's signature on the complaint; then Burkil seen Corvis, and Corvis couldn't afford no scandal when his daughter was being married, and he knew Miss Darret's signature. So he come and seen Krockin and paid him ten thousand to settle the case."

"I still don't see," I declared, "why Burkil killed Krockin."

"Why, you're kind of simple. Guys like that Krockin are so crooked they can't hardly be square with themselves. When somebody was coming to pay Krockin money, he tried to get Burkil and Miss Melton both out of the office. If he could do that, he took an extra cut out of the money for himself; then he told Burkil and Miss Hall he'd had to settle with the guy for less than they expected. For a long while Burkil suspected Krockin was doing that, and he accused him, but Krockin denied it, and Burkil decided to find out.

"There's a vacant office across the court from Krockin's where you can see into Krockin's windows. Burkil went to the building people and told 'em him and Krockin was thinking of changing their office, and they give him a key so he could look at the office, and he had a duplicate key made. The morning Krockin got killed, Krockin sent Burkil and Miss Melton out, but Burkil didn't never leave the building. He went around and got into that other office. He seen Corvis give Krockin the money, and he seen Krockin put part of the money in his pocket and the rest in the safe. When Corvis had gone, Burkil went and accused Krockin, and they had a big quarrel and Burkil shot Krockin. Then he went back and waited in the vacant office till the police come."

"What did Miss Melton have to do with it?"

"She didn't have nothing."

"Then why did you arrest her?"

"Well, that was a piece of police business. The case shaped up this way: them legal papers found in Krockin's office hadn't hardly any of 'em ever come into court and they concerned wealthy people. That looked like blackmail. The question was: had somebody that was being blackmailed knocked off the lawyer, or was it something else? Somebody had left a thumbprint on Krockin's desk and it turned out to be Corvis. Still, we didn't never think Corvis had killed Krockin."

"Why?" I demanded.

"I'll tell you later. We figured Corvis had gone to the office but somebody else had gone there too,

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and the second guy had killed Krockin. So who? Before it was known Krockin had been knocked off, a beauty shop called up. A beauty shop is all right when it is all right, but it's all wrong if there's a crook in it, and cops know a lot of blackmail originates in crooked ones. The beauty shop give us the idea of a ring.

"So how to find out who was in it? There's an old-time police trick: when several people are mixed up in a crime, you lock up one of 'em and you don't let that one communicate with anybody. You don't let nobody know you suspect 'em, but you keep watch of everybody, and they worry about what you might be getting out of the one you've locked up. When people have worried enough they have to do something. So we locked up Miss Melton."

"But you said she had nothing to do with it."

"Why, not with the murder. She knew about the blackmail. She wouldn't tell us nothing because she thought by claiming to know nothing she'd keep out of trouble. Burkil didn't know how much Miss Melton knew. He thought maybe she knew he hadn't went out of the building. He was worried about Miss Hall too, because he had told her he thought Krockin was gyping 'em and he meant to find out. After we pinched Miss Melton, he called Miss Hall up and arranged to meet her, and he told her he hadn't killed Krockin but he had got the money, and he give her three thousand out of what he had got out of Krockin's pocket and out of the safe. Well, you know about that. We'd had her phone tapped. I and you couldn't go to see him and Miss Hall meet because both of 'em knew us, but them cops phoned headquarters, and a couple of plain-clothes guys was there when they met and seen him pass her the money.

"Then we pinched both of 'em. When we got 'em to headquarters we questioned all them people together, and cops brought in seven thousand bucks more that they'd found at Burkil's hotel, and we got how it all was. Now we got a plain murder case."

"But I still don't see," I said, "with so much proof against Corvis why you didn't suspect him."

"Say, use common sense. He's a smart guy and head of a big company. Guys as smart as him don't do no murder, because they know however much trouble they might be in, murder will make it worse."

"A nice piece of psychology," I reflected, "and Corvis owes you a debt of gratitude."

"Yeah? Try and collect it. When an innocent guy's in trouble a smart cop looks like an angel to him, but once he's got out of it, the cop only done his duty."

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The old man, recuperating from brain surgery, virtually helpless, was surrounded by Rats—son, daughter-in-law, grandson, all impatient for his millions. But the old man had always been a tough, rugged fighter, and he wasn't about to quit now, no matter how great the odds were against him . . . . .

IN THE HOUSE OF RATS

by TALMAGE POWELL

PARALYZED FROM THE WAIST down, the rich old man lay in bed and contemplated the absurdities of life, death, and the game of golf.

The bandages were off now, and a silver stubble glinted where the skull had been shaven. Under craggy brows his gray eyes were coldly clear as he watched the play of sunlight through the tall windows of his spacious bedroom. He hated the antisepsis of the hospital room and had wanted the hell out. If he had to be flat on his back for a while, let it be in his own giant fourposter bed. But he hadn't counted on returning to a conspiracy to kill him . . .

Miss Castleberry, the private nurse, was a plump pleasant shadow beside the bed as her light touch on his hickorylike wrist checked the strong, steady pulse.

He was a lean, rugged, rawboned old man, gnarled and toughened by early hardships and a lifetime of work. Unlike most old men he'd never thought much about dying. Until that outlandish accident, death had seemed as remote and impersonal as it had when he was, say, twenty-five.

He wasn't afraid to die. But the *way* he would die was what stuck in his craw. The accident had failed to kill him. But the accident had set him up. Who could say that an old man, not long out of brain surgery, hadn't simply stopped breathing during the night? Who could prove that he hadn't taken an overdose of sleeping pills, an old man preferring the peace of final sleep to paralysis for the rest of his life.

He didn't know how The Rats would tip him over the edge. He couldn't actually prove that they would. His suspicions could be dismissed as the ramblings of a

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senile old man. But he knew. His death was being arranged, right here in his own house, and he felt a sense of degradation and personal violation. He'd felt much the same way many years ago when without warning a small rattlesnake had bitten him above the left ankle. He'd stomped the snake to a pulp and then walked three miles across the sun-blasted Texas earth to the drill site and medical aid. The snake's attack had been a blasphemy, an outrage against his sense of decency and fair play . . .

Miss Castleberry dropped his wrist and made a pleasant face. "A man of thirty-nine should have your heartbeat and pulse rate. What are we having for lunch?"

The thought of food had lost its usual savor. But he'd never cowered before any threat in his life, so he was damned if he'd start now. "A steak," he said, "burned on the outside and bleeding in the middle."

"Tiger meat," Miss Castleberry laughed.

"Maybe Katherine will arrive in time to join me," the old man said. "Her plane lands at one o'clock. An hour from the airport—hold the steak, Miss Castleberry, and then make it double."

Dropping his head back, he half closed his eyes. He heard the starched rustle of Miss Castleberry departing, the click of the door as it closed, leaving him alone in the silence.

Katherine, his niece, was the only member of the family still absent. The thought was a reminder of how few people he really had. There was George, his son, who could pretend that he was having no part in his father's murder. And Claudia, George's wife, who could plan it with all the emotion of a Lady Macbeth. And Elwyn—he of the hippie hair and bell bottoms of psychedelic hues—who could execute it.

My son. My daughter-in-law. My grandson. The old man wept silently.

For them the emergency summons had been a happy announcement. The old geezer worth $6,000,000 was in brain surgery. Perhaps he would die under the scalpel. They had flown joyfully in from New York.

But the old geezer hadn't died on the operating table. The heart, the constitution and iron will, had pulled the old geezer through. He would, the doctors were certain, regain at least partial use of his legs in time and live to see any great-grandchildren that Elwyn might spawn. The time for The Rats to strike was here, now—or wait another lifetime to inherit the six millions.

The news of the old man's accident had taken much longer to reach Katherine. She was off in some remote village in the moun-

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tains of Bolivia, where she was serving as a Peace Corp volunteer. Probably the message had finally been handed to her by a barefooted courier and the ragged, brown-skinned people of the village had shared their meagre rations to pack her out by burro.

Such a long arduous trip for Katherine to make, all because of an errant golf ball and an accident almost too freakish to be believed. The sliced tee shot on the eighteenth hole fading into the trees—the opening between two live oaks that offered enticing distance down the fairway—the one-up advantage the old man was dead set on holding—the ball sitting up well on a small clump.

The old man had chosen a three wood and the gamble on reaching the green. Grip, stance, balance—eye on the ball, body turn, pivot, downswing, with the clubhead hissing, packed with power. Then the slight yielding of twigs and desiccated vegetation under the firm left side—just enough to result in a slightly pulled shot. The ball had hit a live oak trunk dead-center and returned straight to his temple with a speed a little less than that of a bullet. Two sounds, like the rapid-fire echo of a cracking pistol. A flare of white light through the old man's brain. Then temporary oblivion . . .

The old man heard the sigh of his bedroom door. George, Claudia, and Elwyn came in and ranged along the foot of his bed. The old man's eyes swept them, and their images underwent a subtle transformation. He could imagine them with twitching whiskers. Rats. Skittering toward the prize. Sniffing at the bait, cautious, but ready to dart and strike and flee back to their hole with a six-million-dollar morsel in their mouths.

George, his inner weaknesses visible at last, magnified by Claudia's domination. George, the mangy gray Rat, squeaking a feeble protest but ticking his paws along with the rest of the pack.

Elwyn, with the glittering eyes of the young Rat totally consumed by greed and by contempt for an old man of the Establishment.

And Claudia, sleek and dark, avaricious, a polished and lacquered scavenger. Vampire Rat, who'd years ago got her claws in a weak, foolish heir to a fortune.

George was unable to meet the old man's eyes. "Good morning, father," he squeaked, with perhaps a note of shame and despair in his voice. But not enough shame. And too little despair.

Elwyn said nothing; he stood with his head tilted, his nose twitching, as if measuring the distance from one dark hole to another.

"Nurse tells us you're feeling

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well today," Claudia said.

The old man said nothing.

"Anything we can do for you, father?" George murmured feebly.

"Not a thing," the old man said. He closed his eyes and turned his head away. He couldn't bear to look at the mockery of the son he might have had.

They stood a moment with ratlike uncertainty; then they turned and slithered out.

The old man heard the door close behind them. He didn't open his eyes. Against the closed lids he saw the scene again of last night, dreamlike in its unreality.

He'd been lying there in the silence, hating the pressure of the bed, despising his inactivity. How long? he'd thought. How long before that first tingle of feeling would return to his toes?

He'd struggled up on his elbows and the need to be in motion, to move under his own power, to forsake the hateful bed if even for a few moments had flamed through him.

His eyes had gleamed when their roving was arrested by the sight of the large square hassock. It was mounted on rollers, and Miss Castleberry had left it quite close to the bed. She'd rested her feet on it while sitting in the chair and reading the evening paper to him.

The old man had turned his body with his corded arms, struggling until his torso had twisted from the bed and draped across the hassock. He'd encouraged himself with a soft, delighted laugh, reached down to the carpet, and inched the hassock with the pressure and push of his palms. His legs and feet had trailed slowly, dropping at last from the bed with a faint thump.

His vigor had renewed itself as he rolled himself across the bedroom, his chest and belly down on the hassock. He'd exulted in the feeling of freedom, looking over his shoulder and giving the bed a friendly sneer.

Grunting and breathing a little quicker, the old man had reached up, grasped the knob, and struggled to open the bedroom door.

The hallway had yawned. The truancy of what he was doing struck him, and the old man had hesitated. Then he'd propelled himself forward, like a legless man on a rollered wooden platform. The trip was, he'd decided, worth all the riot act the doctor could dish out later.

With dim night lights burning here and there, the hallway had been spangled with shadows. Then he'd heard their voices, through a door that was ajar down the hall. Soft, brittle, like the scurrying of tiny claws in the walls.

George: "No, I won't listen! After all, he *is* my father."

And Claudia: "I don't think you have any choice, George. Just what would you do after it's done

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and over? Be a big brave man for once? Tell the world? I don't think so. I think you'll do just as you've always done in your gutless way. Nothing."

The old man had frowned, supine on the hassock in the sudden chill of the hallway. Gradually, the meaning of the conversation began to eat through to him. He'd been numbed, hurt beyond endurance, listening to the snatches of talk until one of them had noticed the door was ajar and closed it.

The old man had managed to roll back to his bed and pull himself onto it. The enormity of the thing they were planning had overwhelmed him. He couldn't digest it all at once. Tell someone? The doctor? Miss Castleberry? The police?

No, that wouldn't help. Just his word against theirs. They would dismiss his unlikely tale as the rambling of an old man who'd suffered a bad head injury.

When he'd drifted at last into exhausted, troubled slumber he'd dreamed of rats. Perhaps that skittering quality of their voices had suggested it. Three rats, circling him on scratchy claws. Three rats with familiar faces . . .

The old man snapped out of his long reverie with the feeling that someone had opened the door. He turned his head.

Katherine had arrived at last. She smiled a warm "Hi!" and the old man didn't trust himself to speak.

"You had one hell of a nerve, scaring me so badly," she was saying, misty-eyed and throaty with the joy of seeing him. "I counted every endless mile back home."

It was exactly the way the old man would have said it himself. She was so like him in so many ways—fiercely loyal, tenacious, durable—qualities his own son had somehow missed. She was his favorite person in the world, and he knew that he was hers. He felt the old rapport, the bond between them, stronger than ever, if that were possible.

"Katherine . . . Kit . . ." The old man could barely talk. She'd been more than a match for the hardships, the jungles of Bolivia. Lithe, lean, and burned to a dark and savage beauty, she'd come out of the jungle concerned only for the old man's recovery and well-being.

The old man had struggled his shoulders up and was reaching for her.

"My—blessed—Kit!"

His dearest Kit, returning to a house of Rats . . .

Then, as she closed the distance to his bedside, the old man had the strangest impression. She moved with the effortless grace of a feline still in the jungle. He noticed the peculiar slant of her eyes. A nudge of the imagination

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and the pupils were elliptical and vertical. The sinewy flow of her as she sat lightly beside him suggested the pent-up power of a guarding leopardess crouched at her maharajah's side. Her voice was a purr, as she told him he looked wonderful and everything was going to be fine.

The impression was all in his mind of course, but—

A soft chuckle formed in his throat. Look out, Rats, he thought, the odds have changed!

The old man closed his eyes. He could relax now. She was stroking his forehead with a velvety paw, the talons sheathed, and the old man murmured under his breath in quiet contentment.

"Kit—Kitty," he was saying. "Pretty Kitty. Nice kitty."

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Your correspondent's remarks anent the London Detection Club have roused interest and (for me, at least) some embarrassment. One lady, teaching a writing course at a Midwestern college, asks what rules the members swear to observe in addition to those already quoted. With the best of intentions I have mislaid her letter and can't answer it. If the lady in question will overlook this seeming discourtesy by sending her name and address, I shall be happy to reply *in propria persona.*

Meanwhile, let it be said that I have stated the only rules relating to craft or technique. The rest of the oath, though amusing and rather impressive when spoken with resonance, deals with matters social rather than technical. Even so, those existing rules provided hazards. Whatever name might be proposed for membership, it used to seem, somebody would always object on the grounds that the candidate either (a) didn't play fair, or (b) couldn't write good English.

One other factor tended to restrict membership. All of us soon learned the futility of electing anybody who for reasons of geography could attend few meetings or none. Thirty-odd years ago two obviously worthy members would have been Ngaio Marsh and Michael Innes, but neither was proposed because at that time the latter lived in Australia and the former, as she still does, in New Zealand.

Still and all, they were great days! Strong is the memory of how John Rhode and I would escort Dr. Austin Freeman up and down the stairs to the club rooms in Gerrard Street, hoping he wouldn't die of a heart attack on the way to dinner at Kettner's.

Codes of rules for constructing detective fiction have been drawn up both by the late Willard Hungtington Wright (S. S. Van Dine) and by the late Monsignor Ronald Knox, himself a Detection Club member. Monsignor Knox set forth unanswerably that the crime must never be fastened on any character whose thoughts we have been allowed to share; the creator of Philo Vance said it must never be fastened on any servant. The latter point, though perhaps debatable, has much in its support. No character can be developed

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as a character when he has little more to say than, "Dinner is served," or, "The hack's here."

But, whatever may be the ultimate rules, I can testify with pleasure that this month's haul consists of three first-rate detective novels and one mystery-adventure well worth your attention.

Somewhat deceptive is the leisurely beginning of *The Best Man to Die,* by Ruth Rendell (Crime Club, $4.50). There will be fireworks ere long, erupting all over the domestic atmosphere of Kingsmarkham, Sussex.

Anybody known as "good old Charlie" Somebody, of course, will almost certainly meet a sticky end. Good old Charlie Hatton, after that bachelor party for Jack Pertwee, has met a watery end in the river before many people begin to suspect the truth about him. What of all that money Charlie has been accumulating? What of the mysterious girl who calls herself Nora Fanshawe? And how does the nursing-home really figure in this?

Chief Inspector Wexford, stolid only on the surface, attacks a problem in which everything seems to be upside down and often is. Here we have more than competent detection, told in smooth, vivid, ironic prose. Nothing is more deceptive than its finale; the character of the murderer, if you are alert enough to spot his identity, has been developed on-stage and under bright light. And Mrs. Rendell, though married to a public relations consultant, invariably plays fair.

When two well-paid fun girls share a Fun City apartment in *Finish Me Off,* by Hillary Waugh (Doubleday, $5.95), the murder of Linda Howard, *nee* Mary Bowman—stabbed to death with one of her clients at the Addison Hotel—draws Detective Frank Sessions into the victim's murky half-world of pimps, pushers, and prostitutes.

Though Linda Howard really enjoyed this profession, her roommate, Gloria Henchel or Ruth Little, has been laboring only so that she can retire and open a beauty parlor in her native New Haven. Convinced that Gloria must know something, Frank Sessions concentrates on her when every other trail seems to end in a blind alley.

His tenacity earns its reward, if almost too late. The only deception here practised is the legitimate deception used by the criminal against authority. The trapping of this innocent-seeming killer highlights a soundly constructed murder mystery of strong characterizations and convincing background detail.

As with our next author's other books, *Enquiry,* by Dick Francis (Harper & Row, $4.95), gives us the very breath of British steeplechase

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racing, even when we are far away from the track.

Kelly Hughes, steeplechase jockey who has pursued other studies at the London School of Economics, loses his license for "pulling back" a horse which has merely tired and faltered; Dexter Cranfield, the horse's trainer, suffers the same disgrace. Somebody unknown has framed them both. The trainer, hardly a very likeable sort, is too crushed to move. Unless Kelly's native wits can find and convict the person responsible for that frame, the future holds no prospect at all.

Colorful characters surround him: Tony, his bibulous cousin; Roberta Cranfield, the trainer's daughter; a shady private eye named Oakley; hostile Lord Gowery of the Jockey Club; tough-minded but sympathetic Lord Ferth. Kelly's position grows desperate when the unknown plotter tries to kill him and nearly succeeds. At length the plotter tries to kill him and nearly succeeds. At length the plotter is snared, after a wild scene in which someone other than the plotter goes raving mad; and it ends, to everybody else's satisfaction, with Kelly comfortably in the arms of a girl he has thought he didn't like.

Near the beginning of Stanley Ellin's *The Bind* (Random House, $5.95) we learn that it *may* have been an accident when healthy, wealthy Walter Thoren, happily married patriarch with two grown children and a life-insurance policy carrying double indemnity, has died in a car smash that should net his heirs two hundred thousand dollars. Insurance Investigator Jake Dekker doesn't believe in accident; neither does Guaranty Life. The company will pay Jake heavily if he can prove Thoren engineered his own death to leave his family in clover; if it can't be proved, they won't pay Jake a penny.

Landing at Miami Beach with a problem on his mind and a temperamental "wife" on his hands, Jake wades neck-deep through trouble before he can even begin to investigate. Evil forces seem to be closing in on Thoren's widow, his attractive daughter, and his philandering son. But the greatest enigma has been provided by the late Walter Thoren himself, a human secret on his own. The secrets are disclosed; the evil forces close in; a gory *dénouement* rounds out this brilliant mystery-adventure at top speed all the way.

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a NEW Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Here is the eighth in the ingratiating series about Nick Velvet, and this adventure recounts one of Nick's more titillating thefts.

Object to be stolen: a valueless calendar.

Place from which object is to be stolen: a cell in a Federal Penitentiary.

Fee (as usual): $20,000.

No doubt about it, Nick Velvet is an ingenious fellow and an ingenuous felon—or is it the other way round? . . .

THE THEFT OF THE COCO LOOT

by EDWARD D. HOCH

FOR NICK VELVET, A MOST unusual thief, the unique was becoming commonplace and one assignment was becoming very much like another. It was a dull humid week toward the end of August—a week in which he'd already turned down an offer of $20,000 to steal a rare first edition from the Library of Congress. He'd been out on his boat with Gloria, sailing around the Sound, even venturing east toward Martha's Vineyard and the Cape, and when he brought the little sloop into the dock he found a message waiting.

"Man wants to see you," one of the fishermen said. "He's waiting over at the marina shop."

Gloria was immediately concerned. "Nicky, you're not going to have to go away again, are you?"

He looked down at her wide pleading eyes. "Maybe not. I'll see what it's about. Wait for me in the car."

He moved through the narrow aisles of the marina shop until he came upon a gray-haired man in a conservative business suit who stood examining a display of sea anchors. He knew at once that this was the man who sought him. "I'm Nick Velvet," he said.

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The man turned with a sigh of relief. "At last! I've been waiting here nearly two hours for you to get back."

"You should have contacted me at home."

"It's urgent. My name is Croft—Samuel Croft. I have an assignment of the type I understand you specialize in."

Nick glanced around, but there was no one within earshot. He picked up a drogue and pretended to examine it. "You should understand right from the beginning that I deal only in the valueless. I do not steal rare first editions, or precious gems, or money."

Samuel Croft pursed his lips. "It's nothing like that. You were recommended to me by someone you helped last year. I can assure you that the object you are to steal is quite valueless. It is, simply, a calendar."

Nick's interest came alive for the first time in weeks. "A calendar? You mean, with dates?"

The gray-haired man nodded. "With dates. A calendar of this year, of the type that is given out free every December. It has absolutely no value."

"My fee is $20,000."

"I know."

"And you'll pay $20,000 for the theft of a valueless calendar?"

"That is correct."

"Where is it?"

"In the cell of a man named John O'Donnell, who is presently in the Federal Penitentiary at Meadville. I understand the calendar hangs on his wall, and that he uses it in the time-honored manner of convicts—to cross off the days while he waits for the end of his sentence."

"You want me to steal a calendar from a convict's cell in a Federal prison?"

"That is correct. As you can see, you will be earning your $20,000."

"All right," Nick agreed. "I'll do it."

"Fine! A man will contact you with further instructions."

Samuel Croft was in the act of turning away when Nick asked, "Just what is John O'Donnell serving time for? Murder? Arson? Kidnaping?"

"Nothing like that. His crime is not important to you."

"I'd still like to know."

Croft sighed, anxious to be gone. "He's serving a five-to-ten-year sentence."

"For what?" Nick asked again.

"Piracy."

It was three days later, on a cloudy Sunday morning, when Nick Velvet sat in the crowded parking lot of the First Baptist Church and spoke to a man named Burma. "Odd place for a meeting," he said, trying to get comfortable in the cramped quarters of Burma's tiny imported car.

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"I sing in the choir here on Sundays. Gotta keep up appearances." He was a pale little man with a pleasant voice, whose clothes seemed oddly ill-fitting. The whole impression was one of an ex-convict trying unsuccessfully to hide his past—which was precisely the truth. "Croft said I should talk with you."

Nick watched the front doors of the church as a few late arrivals straggled inside. "You were John O'Donnell's cellmate?"

"That's right. Nearly a year. I was in on a bum rap. I slugged a postman in an alley. It was so dark I couldn't even see his uniform. How the hell was I supposed to know who he was? I was just after some pocket money, and I get hit with a Federal rap! Two years I was in that place, the last eleven months with O'Donnell."

"Tell me about the calendar."

"It's on the wall opposite the bunks. Here, I'll draw you a little sketch. See, here are the two bunks, for O'Donnell and whoever took my place. Then a sink and toilet, and a little locker for our clothes. The calendar is here, about halfway along the wall. He puts an X through the date every night."

"How big is the calendar?"

"Oh, maybe ten inches across by fifteen inches down—something like that. Just an advertising thing. A different page for every month, but he never tears them off, just flips them over the back."

"An advertising calendar? From where?"

Burma chuckled at the memory. "That was sorta funny. It's from the law firm that defended him at his trial. At least he got something out of them."

Nick's mind was racing. Assignments like this always tickled his curiosity. "I suppose he made a lot of notes on the calendar, wrote things in the margins."

"No. Never saw him do anything like that. Just the big X through the date every night. I told him once it was like prisoners in comic books do. I been in three times and never saw anybody really do that till O'Donnell."

"If there's nothing written on the calendar why is it so important to Samuel Croft?"

The ex-convict shrugged. "I guess you'd have to ask Croft that."

It was not, Nick knew, the easiest job in the world breaking into a Federal prison. Pehaps it was almost as difficult as breaking out of one. He would have to get in *and* out—and not just into the prison itself but into one specific cell in that prison.

He began his planning with a visit to the library, where he dug

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through old newspaper files until he found an account of John O'Donnell's crime and punishment. The newspapers were on microfilm, and he carefully focused the lens to sharpen the features of the faded face. O'Donnell appeared younger than he'd expected, and one shot showed him leaving the courthouse with his slim and scowling wife, who seemed younger still. The article confirmed that he was only 27, though he already had a lengthy criminal record which included armed robbery and assault.

The crime for which he'd been imprisoned was indeed piracy—"robbery committed on the high seas by force of arms"—and the uniqueness of the case had earned it a fair amount of space in the Boston papers. O'Donnell had apparently set out with two other men in a cabin cruiser from Boston harbor. They'd traveled northeast, and then, at a point some 40 miles off Portland, Maine, had intercepted and boarded the luxury yacht Coco, owned by the president of a leading television network. The loot from the robbery totaled $375,000, mainly in jewels from the women passengers. There was a boxed listing of the stolen gems—a 50-carat star sapphire, a 35-carat cabochon emerald, several diamond rings, and some cash.

But the crime had been far from successful. As the three pirates returned to their own craft, a security guard on board the yacht had opened fire, wounding two of the men. Both fell into the water and drowned before they could be pulled aboard the yacht. John O'Donnell, the third pirate, had escaped in the cabin cruiser, heading toward the Maine coast.

Apparently O'Donnell had wandered among the islands of that coast for two days before lack of food and an almost empty fuel tank brought him ashore. The Coast Guard spotted his boat, and he was arrested as he came ashore on Mt. Desert Island, near Bar Harbor. The missing jewels were not found on him, or in the boat, and he claimed they had gone overboard with his partners when they were shot.

Despite his record and the fact of the missing loot, O'Donnell had got off with 5-to-10 years, a short sentence. He'd started serving it a little over a year ago, which meant he still had a few years to go, even with time off for good behavior. Nick read it all through twice and then switched off the viewer. He returned the microfilm to the librarian and went in search of an atlas.

For ten minutes he pondered a map of the Maine coastline, but it told him nothing. There seemed to be hundreds of tiny islands with names like Bailey and

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Deer and Swans and St. Mark and Head Harbor. If O'Donnell had lied about the missing loot, he'd have had plenty of opportunity to bury it somewhere before he was caught. Just like the pirates of old.

Nick closed the atlas and decided it was time to visit Mrs. O'Donnell.

She opened the apartment door on his second knock and stood back to inspect him in the dim light of the hallway. "You're Mr. Nicholas, the man who phoned?"

"That's right," he said. "May I come in?"

She was wearing a flowered house dress that was a size too small, and she'd made some hasty efforts to apply makeup, but it did little good. At the age of 26 she was tired and withdrawn, a woman spent and soiled. "Sure, come on in," she said. As he passed, he caught the odor of gin on her breath.

"Mrs. O'Donnell—"

"You can call me Madge. Want a drink?"

"It's still a bit early for me, thanks."

"Early! What in hell time is it?"

"Two o'clock." He glanced at the drawn drapes that covered all the windows. "In the afternoon."

"Oh. Well, what'd you want?"

"It's about your husband, Mrs. O'Donnell."

"Madge."

"Madge."

"What about him? The creep's sitting on a ton of diamonds and he won't even tell me where they are! Afraid I'll take them and run off with somebody else, I guess." She smiled slyly. "And he might be right, at that."

Nick cleared his throat. "Madge, I'm writing a book about crimes at sea. Perhaps you've seen my articles in *Life* and *The New York Times*. Anyway, I'd like to speak to your husband about his case. I want to include it in my book."

"He won't tell you any more than he's told me."

"Nevertheless—"

"How much?" she asked suddenly. "How much will you pay me if I get him to see you?"

"A hundred dollars?" Nick suggested tentatively.

"Two hundred. In advance."

"A hundred in advance. The other hundred after I talk to him."

She thought about that, but not for long. "It's a deal. When do you want to see him?"

"As soon as I can. The book's deadline—"

"Visiting day is Sunday. I'll talk to him then."

"All right."

She hesitated. "There's one thing about it he might not tell you."

"About the piracy?"

Madge O'Donnell nodded. She

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seemed even more tired. "About the two men who died."

"What about them?"

"They were my brothers."

The warden of the Federal Penitentiary at Meadville was a stout balding man named Perkins, who looked like a small-town politician. He touched his fingertips together very carefully and said, "You understand, Mr. Nicholas, that within certain well-defined guidelines each Federal prison operates under its own rules and regulations. What might be approved in one prison could be forbidden in another."

"I understand that," Nick agreed. "But I only want to interview John O'Donnell for my book. Surely that could be arranged."

The warden shrugged. "If he wishes, you could certainly see him on Visitors' Day."

"I don't mean with a screen between us. I mean sitting and talking as we are now, perhaps in his cell."

Warden Perkins chuckled at that. "Out of the question! Even his lawyer couldn't visit him in his cell."

"Then in a private office somewhere?"

"Well . . ." The warden thought about it. "I might agree, if certain security precautions were taken. A guard would have to be present at all times, and you would have to be thoroughly searched before each meeting." He shifted nervously in his chair before adding distastefully, "We've been having some trouble with narcotics being smuggled in."

"Agreed," Nick said, as if he'd expected such conditions all along. "How would next week be for my first visit—perhaps Monday?" He couldn't appear too eager, but he hated putting off the first meeting for even those few days.

"I think that could be arranged," Warden Perkins said.

Nick allowed himself a slow smile as he stood up. So far his plan was working.

Nick spent the weekend carefully working out three possible methods of reaching John O'Donnell's cell. One of them involved extreme personal danger, and he placed that third on his list. He was a clever man, but not a foolish one.

The method he decided to try first was a slow and trying one. It involved two preliminary meetings with John O'Donnell at which Nick did nothing but ask questions and take notes for his mythical book. O'Donnell proved to be a mean-looking man whose weatherbeaten features made him appear much older than his 27 years. He'd been raised as a Catholic, educated in a parochial school, and still wore a somewhat

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incongruous religious medal that showed at the open neck of his prison shirt. He did not particularly trust Nick Velvet, and his answers to questions were cautious and terse.

Nick had been searched before each of the half-hour meetings, and on the third occasion the routine was the same. He took his seat in the small barren room—a room usually reserved for convicts and their lawyers—and waited until John O'Donnell was brought in. As usual the uniformed guard seated himself against the wall. He seemed bored by the whole affair.

O'Donnell was a bit more talkative this time, and seemed to be relaxing in Nick's presence. "If your book's a success do I get a cut?" he wanted to know.

Nick smiled. "You'll be taken care of." He'd noticed that O'Donnell always brought a pack of cigarettes with him and that he smoked continuously while they talked. On previous occasions Nick had taken one of the cigarettes, and he reached for the pack now. The guard shifted in his chair, still looking bored.

"What else do you want to know?" O'Donnell asked.

"We're up to the robbery now. The two that were killed—they were your wife's brothers?"

"Yeah. The Gaetano brothers. It was too bad about them."

"You told the officials the loot went into the water with them."

O'Donnell scowled at Nick before he answered. He was fingering the medal around his neck. "That's what I said and that's what happened."

"What did you do during the hours before your capture?"

"Sailed around and looked at the scenery." He ground out his cigarette. "That's all you're gettin' from me, wise guy! You're starting to sound like a detective."

Nick shrugged and watched while the guard stepped forward to take O'Donnell back to his cell. It was a routine he'd seen before, and he observed it casually now. The guard gave O'Donnell a quick haphazard frisk and then unlocked the door. They left the room without another word to Nick.

Nick waited, slowly finishing his cigarette, and then stood up. Three minutes. Time enough for O'Donnell to be almost back to his cell.

Then Nick stepped into the corridor that led to the front gate. "Guard, guard!"

The uniformed man on duty turned, looking up from the newspaper he was reading. "What is it, Mr. Nicholas? Are you ready to leave?"

"I think I've been robbed! I think O'Donnell took a little penknife I was carrying."

The guard cursed softly under his breath. "You stay right there.

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I'll go and get the warden."

Within five minutes Warden Perkins was on the scene, breathing hard. "Now what's all this, Nicholas?"

"I was carrying a small penknife and it's gone. I think O'Donnell stole it somehow while I was talking to him."

Perkins glared at the guard. "You let this man see the prisoner while he had a knife in his pocket?"

Nick hastened to intervene. "It's not his fault. It's one of these little round knives that looks just like a coin when it's closed. It was with my keys. The guard missed it, and I never thought about it. I used it to cut a hangnail and O'Donnell must have noticed it while we talked. I don't know how he managed to get it away from me."

The warden was angry and red-faced. "This will be the last of your sessions with the prisoner, Mr. Nicholas. Your visiting permission is revoked, effective immediately." Then, to the guard, "Come on. We'll have to search his cell."

Nick tensed. This was the crucial moment. "Shouldn't you take me with you?" he asked, trying to keep his voice natural. "The guards might miss it again in the search, but I can identify it."

Warden Perkins glared at him. "For all I know you slipped the knife to O'Donnell on purpose."

"Would I be telling you about it if I had?"

The warden thought about that, his face growing redder by the minute. "Guard, search this man again. Carefully this time! Make sure he doesn't have this little knife on him somewhere."

The guard did as he was told, running his hands through Nick's pockets, up and down his body. "No knife on him, Warden," the man reported finally.

"All right," Perkins decided. "We're going up to the cell. Bring Mr. Nicholas along, but don't take your eyes off him."

Nick felt his whole body relax at the words. It had been a 50-50 chance at best, but now it was working. So far.

The warden led the way, with Nick in the middle and two guards bringing up the rear. They passed through three barred gates and a steel door before they finally reached the cellblock proper. Here they had to climb a spiral staircase to the second tier of cells, and Nick could feel the prisoners' eyes on them as their shoes clattered up the steel steps.

They went halfway down the line of cells, past staring faces that lined the barred doorways, pausing finally in front of John O'Donnell's cell. "Open this one," Warden Perkins ordered. A switch was thrown at the end of the line and a key inserted. They entered O'Donnell's cell.

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The man with the weatherbeaten face was waiting for them. His cellmate, a thin man with a shaved head, stayed on his bunk, trying to ignore the sudden intrusion. "What's all this?" O'Donnell asked.

"We want the knife," Perkins said quietly.

"What knife? What in hell you talking about?"

"The penknife you stole from Mr. Nicholas."

"You're nuts! I got no knife!"

"Search him," Warden Perkins said. "Search him, search the cell, search the other one too."

The guards went to work, and Nick allowed his eyes to wander to the wall. The calendar was in place, just where Burma had said it would be. The days of early September had been crossed out with large black X's, right up to yesterday.

Nick edged his way into the cell. A guard said, "Stay out of the way," and he flattened himself against the wall, his back to the calendar.

It took one of the guards just two minutes to find the pack of cigarettes and feel the weight of it. He ripped it open and scattered the cigarettes on the bunk blanket. A shiny coinlike object dropped among them, its golden face twinkling in the light.

"That's it!" Nick said loudly.

"What the hell!" O'Donnell turned to him, snarling. "What kind of a frame is this? You slipped that in my cigarettes!"

Warden Perkins turned the object over in his hand, using a thumbnail to pull open the inch-long knife blade. "Couldn't do much damage with this," he decided. "It's not even sharp."

"I'm sorry about the whole thing," Nick said.

Perkins grunted, beginning to relax. "You should be. Come on, let's get out of here. This will go on your record, O'Donnell. I'll deal with you later."

Ten minutes later Nick Velvet was walking through the main gate of the Meadville prison, with John O'Donnell's calendar beneath his coat, held snugly by the pressure of his left arm. If O'Donnell noticed its disappearance, he might blame it on a guard. In any event he wouldn't be likely to complain.

Later, in his car, Nick studied the pages of John O'Donnell's calendar. It was from a law firm, as Burma had said, and as Nick flipped back over the past months he saw that every date had indeed been X'd out. One date, however, had a circle drawn around it—April 25th. Nick wondered what had happened to John O'Donnell on that date to make him vary his daily routine.

There was no writing or marking of any kind on the calendar. Nick flipped through the twelve

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pages, holding them up to the sunlight and examining them carefully. But it was just a calendar and nothing more—a calendar worth $20,000 to Samuel Croft . . .

Nick met Croft by arrangement the following morning, this time in the parking lot of a shopping center in White Plains. He was surprised to see Burma in the car too. He hadn't realized the men were partners in this venture.

"Did you get it?" Croft asked.

"Of course. I told you I would." Nick slipped the calendar out of a large brown envelope and handed it over. "I'd like the balance of my money. Cash on delivery, as agreed."

Croft flipped over the pages, nodding his head. "Yes, yes. Very well. Burma here will take you to the money. We couldn't risk bringing it in the car."

"Where is it?"

"Just over there," Burma said. "In my station wagon."

Nick didn't like it, but he had no choice. "All right. Let's get it. I want to get out of here."

As soon as they had left Samuel Croft's car, the gray-haired man started the motor and drove out toward the divided highway. Nick watched him go, wishing now that he hadn't parted with the calendar quite so readily. They reached the blue station wagon and Burma opened the door.

In that instant Nick knew it was all wrong. Nobody leaves the larger part of $20,000 in an unlocked automobile. He tried to back away but it was too late. Burma had the pistol in his hand. It was a .22 target model equipped with a silencer, no good at long range, but deadly at three feet.

"Get in the car," Burma ordered.

Nick slid into the front seat, keeping his hands in view. "What is this? Where's my money?"

The ex-convict slid behind the wheel, keeping the gun level but below the windshield. Around them cars were carrying unsuspicious people on their day's shopping. "Mr. Croft don't trust you, Velvet. He's heard too many stories about how you double-crossed your clients. He doesn't want you taking the twenty grand and then beating him to the jewels."

"The loot? Then it didn't go into the sea."

"You know damn well it didn't. O'Donnell told me so himself—bragged about it in prison. He buried it somewhere, just like a real pirate. But he'd never tell me where. Just before I got out I asked him what would happen if he died without telling anyone. Guys are always dying in prison, even young guys. A knifing in the yard, an accident in the shop, anything like that. But O'Donnell said he'd taken

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care of it. He said his calendar would tell where the loot was hidden.

"I spent all one night looking over the damned calendar and I couldn't find anything. Just a lot of dates crossed out. But when I got out and told Croft about it he called me a fool. He said he had to see the calendar to figure out the clue that O'Donnell had left there. So he hired you to steal it, Velvet. He didn't trust you from the beginning, but he knew no one else could do the job."

"Who is Croft?"

"He financed O'Donnell and the Gaetano brothers with the boat. Croft was supposed to get a share of the loot. That's why I went to him when I got out of Meadville. I figured he'd pay for the information I had, that the loot was hidden somewhere. He's gonna cut me in."

"I'll bet," Nick said. "Just like me. He's halfway to the jewels now, while you sit here and keep babbling."

The gun rose an inch. "I'll take care of Mr. Croft if and when the time comes," Burma said. "Right now I'm taking care of you, Velvet."

Nick tensed to jump him, but he knew that in the cramped front seat he had no chance of dodging a bullet. Then, suddenly, out of the corner of his eye he saw a gray sedan bearing down on them. He had an instant's glimpse of a woman's face behind the wheel before the car hit them broadside.

Burma was thrown into Nick by the force of the crash. He was still trying to bring up the silenced pistol when Nick hit him with a judo chop on the neck. He stuffed the pistol in his pocket and climbed out the passenger's side to survey the damage.

"Oddly enough, I want to thank you," Nick said to the woman.

"Don't thank me," she said. "Just take me to the jewels."

It was Mrs. O'Donnell, of course.

The sky in the east was speckled with dawn when Nick Velvet edged his rented cabin cruiser toward the jagged Maine coastline early the following morning. It had taken him and Madge O'Donnell most of the night to make the trip by boat up the New England coast, and even then they knew they were probably hours behind Samuel Croft.

"I've got two brothers dead and a husband in jail," Madge had argued. "If those jewels belong to anyone they belong to me."

When her husband had realized his calendar was missing, he hadn't reported it to the guards but he had got word out to his wife. Instinctively he suspected Samuel Croft, and Madge had followed Croft from his home that

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morning. She'd watched the meeting between Nick and the men then she'd rammed Burma's car when she realized what was happening.

"I still have to thank you," Nick had told her as they cruised up around Cape Cod. "You probably saved my life."

"Just get me what's mine," she answered.

They'd driven as far as Rhode Island before renting the boat, but it was still a long distance up the coast to the Maine islands. It was a journey that should have taken some 16 hours, but Nick shortened it by going through Buzzard's Bay and the Cape Cod Canal. By dawn they were in sight of the island that Nick sought.

It was a tiny outcropping of rock, like so many of the Maine islands, and could not have been more than a few acres in area. In the morning light, lying low in the September sea mist, it looked absolutely deserted.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Madge asked.

"Lady, I'm not sure of anything." Nick guided the craft carefully into shore, until the charts showed the water to be dangerously shallow. "We wade from here," he said. "Hope you don't mind getting wet."

"I don't see Croft's boat."

"Maybe he's been and gone."

He helped her into the hip-deep water and they waded ashore, with the mist giving a dreamlike quality to the scene. Nick felt the tug of unreality as the waters receded and they reached the dry rocky beach.

"Where would he have buried it?" she asked.

"You're full of questions, aren't you?" He looked around, taking in the rock and sand and scant vegetation. There was no building on the island, but here and there along the beach the remains of a campfire showed that the place was not completely neglected by picnicking yachtsmen.

Nick moved inland, toward the highest point of the island. He passed through some brush and a small clump of pine trees, and then he saw the marker. It was a wooden slat stuck into the earth. On it, crudely lettered, were the words: *Here lies my faithful dog Coco.*

"Coco!" Madge O'Donnell exclaimed. "That was the name of the yacht they robbed!"

"Yeah," Nick said. "It looks like we've found the buried treasure."

He went back to the boat for a shovel, and ten minutes later they had uncovered the oilskin package. Nick opened it carefully, exposing a sparkling cache of jewels. There were diamond rings, a man's diamond stickpin, and even some moldy twenty- and fifty-dollar bills.

"The pirate's treasure," Nick

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breathed. "The loot of the yacht Coco."

"Here's the star sapphire. And the emerald—"

The high ringing crack of a rifle shot split the air, almost in the same instant that a bullet clipped through the underbrush at Nick's side. "Down!" he shouted, pulling her with him. "It's Croft."

He raised his head from the ground and saw a power launch riding the waves next to his rented boat. Croft and Burma were moving through the shallow water, both armed with rifles. The morning mist had hidden their approach until it was too late.

"Do you have a gun?" she asked Nick.

He slipped the silenced .22 from his jacket pocket. "I've still got Burma's, but it's no good at this range. Keep low. They might think they hit one of us."

"Velvet!" Croft shouted, moving closer. "I know you're there! Come out! There's enough for everyone."

Burma had moved over to the right to flank their position. Nick steadied the silenced target pistol and drew a bead on him. He waited till the ex-con was closer and then squeezed the trigger. There was a dull puff from the gun and Burma grabbed at his side. "Croft, I'm hit! Help, he shot me!"

Croft turned and fired two wild shots, but he had no target. Then Nick was up and running toward him, crouching low to make the smallest possible target. Croft whirled to fire again, but Nick got off a quick shot with his .22. The gray-haired man staggered and went down on one knee.

"Damn you, Velvet!" he snarled. "I'm bleeding!"

"A .22 doesn't do much damage at that range. Burma was going to kill me with it, so you should consider yourself lucky." He turned to the girl. "Hand me their rifles and then get the first-aid kit from the boat. You can be a nice nurse and bandage them up."

"I'll bleed to death," Croft moaned.

"There's a Coast Guard station up the coast. We'll deliver you there in fine shape."

"How did you find this place, Velvet?"

Nick smiled. "The same way you did. O'Donnell told Burma the calendar had a clue to where the loot was buried. The calendar had no writing on it, just a lot of X'ed-out dates. Only one date was different—it had a circle around it. April 25th. O'Donnell was raised a Catholic, went to a Catholic School, and on the Church calendar April 25th is the feast day of St. Mark. I remembered seeing an island called St. Mark on the map of the Maine coast, so I headed here."

"How do we get them to the

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Coast Guard station?" Madge O'Donnell asked.

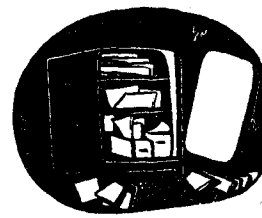
"You take them, in Croft's boat. I'll be in the other one."

"But the jewels—"

Nick kept on smiling, and the gun in his hand and the rifles under his arm were casually pointed at the ground; but she got his message. "I'm keeping them. Croft never paid me the balance of my fee."

"But—"

"Come on, get going. I'll keep them to look at a while, and then maybe I'll return them to their owners." He thought about it and added, "Maybe."



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BLOOD-RED IN THE MORNING

by HUGH PENTECOST

(continued from page 31)

I don't know that I can describe exactly how I felt. There was a pain in my gut like a hot ball. I hadn't gone ten yards toward the terrace before I was blaming myself for everything that had happened to Laura. At the age of 16 I should have come charging back on a white horse and carrried her away. I knew I couldn't have done it, but I should have tried.

She had painted a vivid picture for me. I'd have been faced by T.J. and an army of servants and gardeners and chauffeurs, all looking like Manuel Zack, and they'd have beaten my brains out. But at least I'd have tried, and then maybe she wouldn't have run away and—and done everything she had done.

Laura was right. I was one of T.J.'s boys and I played by his rules. I had surrendered Laura to the Vandals. I could forgive her anything because, damn it, I still loved her.

And just as I was feeling very noble about that decision I remembered my brother Eddie's letter: "They finally found her in the East Village living in a pad with half a dozen long-haired goons." I began to have visions of what that had been like, and I felt sick and ice-cold in spite of the August heat.

You could recall things about yourself and write them off without any feeling of loathing or horror. There had been a gaudy place in Saigon where I'd spent the better part of two leaves. That was an exigency of war, I told myself, to be forgiven and forgotten. But Laura? A small voice told me that was an exigency of war, too—a war against the T.J.'s and the Zacks, a war against what she thought of as the Establishment, a war against indecent use of power . . .

Someone had produced an ice cooler while we were gone, and Zack was making himself an iced coffee, laced with thick fresh cream. He gave us a knowing little smile as we rejoined the family, positioned almost as they had been when we left.

"Got your story all nicely arranged between you?" Zack asked.

Sergeant Sayers was a spectator at the far end of the terrace.

I felt myself figuratively tightening my belt. I was going to fight this battle right down to the last man, even if that last

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man was me. I looked around at the rest of T.J.'s army. One son and his wife stood in the corner, dark and gloomy; the other son and his wife sat on the wicker couch, waiting avidly for Round Two. Lydia had come back from inside the house and was sitting in an armchair at the head of the buffet table, still the perfect hostess. There was one change. She had put on a pair of black-lensed glasses that completely hid anything she might be thinking. She was now a kind of glamorous sphinx. T.J. stood across from her, watching her as though he expected she might go to pieces.

"Some facts for all of you," Zack said, "just so you'll know where we stand. There are no fingerprints on the murder weapon. Sayers found a pair of cotton gardening gloves thrown away in the lilac bush just beyond the pond. We assume the murderer wore them." He sipped his creamy drink, the ice tinkling against the side of the glass. "The garden tools are kept in a shed about fifty yards from the pond. Swenson, the head gardener, runs a neat ship. Tools are not left lying around. There is an exact place on the wall of the shed where those garden shears usually hang. On a table a few feet away there is a workbasket full of gardening gloves—like the pair we found in the lilacs. It paints a kind of different picture from the one I first had." He put his glass down and lit a cigarette.

"I thought of a quarrel, an explosion, and someone grabbing up the shears which just happened to be there and striking with them. There might be an excuse for that—intolerable provocation, self-defense. Even"—and he looked at Laura—"temporary insanity. Now we have to picture it another way. Traynor goes down to the pool sometime before five in the morning, perhaps to swim, probably to meet someone. You, Miss Gibney?"

Laura shook her head.

"Then someone else," Zack said. His dark eyes moved almost hungrily to Sheila, then to Lydia, then to the stone-faced Marcia. "Traynor meets this someone at the pool and they engage in some sort of dalliance. Miss Gibney comes out and sees it. She's infuriated because Traynor is her property."

"That's pure fiction," I said.

"I know," Zack said, grinning at me. "We're inventing a story. So—Miss Gibney sees this thing taking place and she blows her stack. She conveniently doesn't remember it now, but she moves swiftly down the top side of the garden to the tool shed, puts on a pair of gloves, and takes the shears from its place on the wall. Then she comes stealthily back along the low side of the garden

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to the pool. Traynor's companion has by now retired to the house, and Miss Gibney—temporarily insane, we may say out of kindness—runs the shears through her false lover. She tosses away the gloves, but she has no time to escape because Palmer has appeared on the wall between the gargoyle fountains and is looking down at her. She can't invent a story to satisfy him on the spur of the moment, so she invents amnesia."

"I'm not sure you have the legal right to indulge in this kind of fantasying," I said.

"I sure do, boy," Zack said. "Under the law it's called inference from the facts. I have the right to infer anything I please from the facts. The weak spot in my inference is the sudden disappearance of the third party. It would be more watertight if we assume that the dalliance at the pool was between Traynor and Miss Gibney, and that you, Palmer, were the enraged witness. You knew very well where the tool shed was from your boyhood days around here. You armed yourself with the shears and you killed Traynor. Miss Gibney *could* have been shocked out of remembering by the violence of it, and because it was you, Palmer. Or because it *was* you she's decided to protect you at any cost."

"You keep going round and round in the same circle," I said. "Do I get a turn at inventing a story?"

The thin smile was cruel. "You must have sweated out a dozen of 'em in the last few hours," Zack said. "If you've got a good one, why not try it on us?"

I reached out and touched Laura's hand—for luck. And then I turned toward Mike Sayers who was studying me with a blank expression through his green glasses.

"I want to be sure Sergeant Sayers is listening," I said. "I've known him since we were kids. We've been through just about the same mill. I only hope he hasn't sold out."

"Meaning?" Zack asked, his eyebrows contracting.

"Meaning that everybody knows you sold out long ago, Zack. T.J. took you to the mountaintop and showed you the world, and you lied for him and he paid you off with a job—and probably with a substantial bank account."

"Do we have to listen to a rehash of this dreary small-town gossip?" T.J. asked in a tired but dangerous voice.

"Let him go on," Zack said. The glitter in his black eyes told me that if we ever met alone it was going to be him or me.

"I just want to be sure that someone listens who hasn't been brainwashed by T. J. Gibney's world," I said. "Are you listening, Mike?"

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A little nerve twitched high up on Sayers's bronzed cheek, but he didn't speak or make any sign. There was no way to tell about him.

"There are a number of reasons for killing a man," I said. "You kill because somebody orders you to; I've done that too many times. You kill out of jealousy; that's the one Zack's bugged with. You kill for greed; no one here needs anything that a dead Julian Traynor could give. Finally, you kill because the person threatens you, places you in danger, might even destroy you. So I draw *my* inference, Zack. I infer that there was no reason for anyone to kill Julian Traynor except that he was a threat. So—*who could he threaten and how?*"

I turned to look straight at T J. "For months Traynor has been digging into the history of the Gibney family and particularly into the personal life of T.J. Gibney. I infer that somehow, somewhere—under some stone or from behind the woodwork—Traynor came up with something that T.J. Gibney and the Gibney family couldn't afford to have made public. After months of discovering how the world is really run, I infer that Julian Traynor put the heat on T.J. Gibney or on some other member of the family. Pay up or face the music. I infer that Traynor had a strong hand and that the Gibneys knew they were hooked for life. The one flaw in Traynor's scheme was that he underestimated just how far the Gibney family would go to prevent being hooked. They would go the limit, the whole way."

"Now ain't that something," Zack said sarcastically.

"I infer further that Traynor had evidence, that the evidence is somewhere in his notes, in the tapes he made, or even locked away in a safety-deposit box somewhere. I infer that if you go through Traynor's possessions you will find what you need to wrap up this case, Zack Unless—"

"Unless what, buster?" Zack said, and his tone was menacing.

"Unless it's too late," I said.

"It's just a matter of routine to go through Traynor's belongings," Mike Sayers said. Everybody turned to look at him. I think they'd all forgotten he was there. "To back up *your* theory, Mr. Zack, there could be letters from Miss Gibney to Traynor."

"There's just one more thing I'd like to make clear," I said. "You've chosen Laura and me as your pigeons. Neither one of us is going to answer any more questions without the advice of a lawyer."

"Well, I don't know about you, Palmer," T.J. said, "but Guy Maxwell should be here soon. He

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will, of course, represent Laura."

"You have to be kidding," I said. "You don't think I'd let Laura be represented by your lawyer, do you?"

T.J. seemed to swell up and I thought he was going to burst. "*You* won't let!"

"Laura isn't a Gibney any more," I said. "She's joined the opposition."

"Oh, my God," Lydia said softly. "Oh, my God."

For better or for worse I'd accomplished one thing. Zack and Sayers went upstairs to go through Traynor's bedroom and study. I'd been guessing, but if I'd guessed right I might have blown the ball game then and there. If there was anything damaging to T.J. Gibney upstairs it was a sure thing Zack would try to cover for him. If Mike Sayers had sold out too, then Traynor's secret—if he'd uncovered one—would stay a secret.

The moment the law headed upstairs, T.J. gave a little signal to his sons and the three of them disappeared into the house, leaving me on the terrace with the four women.

It was Marcia Gibney who broke the strained silence. "Coffee, Mr. Palmer?" she asked. She'd crossed to the buffet to pour herself a cup.

I didn't want coffee or anything else. I wanted out. I wanted a chance to think. I kept looking at Laura and that brought on visions I wanted to destroy.

"I don't suppose you and Laura can ever forgive T.J. for what happened long ago," Marcia said. She produced a bottle of saccharine from the pocket of her dress to sweeten her coffee. "But he is a fine man, a fair man, a decent man. His only problem is his temper. Don't try him beyond his capacity to control it, Mr. Palmer. Do you really think we won't do everything we can to protect Laura?"

"Protect her from what?" I asked.

"Why—why, the consequences of what she's done!" Marcia said. "Surely no one can believe that she was in possession of her faculties when she—when she did what she did."

"Please, Johnny, there's no point," Laura said before I could answer. "Don't you see, I'm being offered a Gibney kindness. I'm to be shipped to a mental institution instead of the deathhouse."

"Laura!" Lydia protested. She leaned her head back against her chair. I suspected the blue eyes were closed behind the black lenses. "For the love of God, tell me the truth, Laura."

"The truth about what, Mother?"

Lydia suddenly leaned forward, gripping the arms of her chair. "*What did you see this morning?*"

Laura shook her head from side

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to side. "I've told the truth, Mother. I don't know. I keep struggling to remember—but I don't know! It won't come back."

Sheila got into the act then with her high harsh voice. "Is there any way you can take her away from here, Johnny, so she can think without being badgered?"

"How?"

"My car's by the front door—the red Mercedes." She held out a set of keys to me. "Take it and get the hell out of here as fast as you can. You see what's going to happen, don't you? Zack will build up a case against one or both of you and then when Laura *does* remember it will be too late. They'll simply say she's inventing something to clear herself—or you, Johnny."

"I doubt we'd get fifty yards away from the house," I said. "There are other troopers. And running would make things look worse for us."

"Then don't let Laura out of your sight," Sheila said. Her usually laughing face was now a hard mask. "Somebody knows what Laura will remember, when and if she does."

Marcia stared at her sister-in-law. "Sheila! Are you trying to say that someone in the family might harm Laura to—to *keep* her from remembering?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, my dear innocent dope! And God forbid it should be my man. Get away from here, Laura. Take the temptation away from them."

There was an anguished cry from Lydia as she covered her face with her hands.

"Tell her not to talk that way, Mother Gibney," Marcia said.

"Lydia knows how they are," Sheila said.

"Not murder," Lydia whispered. "Oh, please, not *murder!*"

"You think it was a passing tramp who killed Julian?" Sheila said. "Do you really believe it was Laura or Johnny?" She turned to us and the green cat's-eyes were brilliant. "If it was Bob, I warn you I'll lie you both into the electric chair if I have to." She tossed the car keys on the buffet and headed for the house. "I need a large slug of bourbon."

The trickle of sweat that ran down my back was cold. Someone must be choked with fear that Laura would remember the truth. Traynor's death had been planned, but one thing had gone wrong. Laura, who should have been asleep, had been an eyewitness to the murder.

"It's not as monstrous as Sheila paints it, or as you think it is, Laura," Lydia said. She sounded exhausted.

"You've defended Father all the years of your marriage," Laura said. "Don't try to whitewash him to me, Mother. I know him."

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"I don't think you do. I don't think you could," Lydia said. "You haven't ever loved him."

Laura's wide blue eyes contracted. "Have you forgotten, Mother? Have you forgotten what every little girl feels about her father? Oh, I loved him—until he stamped it out, like someone putting out a fire."

"Was there ever anything you wanted that he didn't give you?" Lydia asked, a note of pleading in her throaty voice.

"Yes." The blue eyes flicked my way. "Understanding about Johnny Palmer."

"Truly, Laura, can you imagine any father who wouldn't have been outraged?"

"There's no use discussing it, Mother. You've been here this morning. You've watched the way he and Zack work together. It's clear, isn't it, that he's chosen me, or my friend Johnny, to pay for whatever's happened here. For God sake, Mother, don't you understand what's going on? A man has been murdered, brutally, coldbloodedly. What does Father do? Does he ask who is guilty? No, he just wonders how it will come out best for him. Ideally it should be Johnny, an outsider, who did it. But if that won't stick, then it will be me, the daughter who has already publically shamed him, who is clearly some kind of a rotten nut."

"You say you can't remember what happened!" Lydia's voice rose. "Perhaps Johnny—perhaps you—"

"Listen, Mother, I'll say it once for you, and also in a way for Johnny," Laura said. "I had no reason in the world to want Julian Traynor dead. There is nothing he could have done to me that would have made me want him dead. He came to see me in New York after Father's detectives found me. He was kind and sympathetic and he had the saving grace of being able to find some humor in the situation. A twenty-two year old girl fighting the Gibney powerhouse, not without success, amused him.

"But he pleaded your case well, Mother. He made me see that you weren't responsible for the things against which I'd rebelled. He convinced me that it would be a loving gesture to you if I came back here for Father's seventieth birthday. Would I want Julian dead for that? I love you, Mother. I was glad to come to the birthday party if it would make you happy."

"Laura!"

"Julian's attitude was modern—not like yours or Father's or even Johnny's. When he came to see me—three times I think it was—he realized I was living in a different world with different values. He took me somewhere and bought me a drink, then suggested, quite

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casually, that it would be fun if we went somewhere and made love. I said no, not because he was unattractive, but because of his close association with Father I would be secretly doing it to hurt Father, and that would have been for the wrong reason. He understood. He said, 'Thanks anyway,' and 'See you around'—and that was that. I liked him for understanding. I had no reason on earth for wanting him hurt, let alone brutally murdered."

"If what you've forgotten is that he tried to force himself on you—?"

"Mother, I'm a big girl! Just maybe you can begin to understand that. Father doesn't want to. He decided long ago that I was a—I guess his words would be 'wanton' and 'jezebel.' It suits his dilemma this morning."

Marcia broke in, her gaunt face set in lines of tension. "Do you believe there's anything to Mr. Palmer's theory that Julian was trying to blackmail T.J.?"

"Or Emerson or Bob or the family image in general. What other reason on earth can there be? My God, Marcia, haven't we lived with that all our lives? Isn't there an entire office in New York staffed with people who do nothing but see to it that the Gibney name has a perpetually glowing halo over it? If Julian found out something that would ruin that image overnight and decided to use it to benefit himself, can you imagine the Gibneys hesitating one minute to stop him?"

"Emerson would never be involved in such a thing," Marcia said.

"My dear sister-in-law," Laura said bitterly, "Emerson is the most cold-blooded of the lot, because he's the weakest. Some day he will be king of the Gibney empire, and he can't risk having anything spoil that dream. He's put up with too much, been a glorified errand boy for too long."

I found myself looking at the keys that Sheila had left on the buffet. I moved casually toward the far end of the terrace to where I could see a part of the circular driveway in front of the house. I could see the red Mercedes and I knew it offered no escape for us. A trooper was leaning against it, talking to a second trooper and to Dr. Fred Marshall, the town health officer. It would have been necessary for him to view the body before it was removed. The doctor was a pleasant youngish man whom I'd known ever since I could remember. Somehow it was a relief to see him there. He was his own man and I knew nobody could buy him. I stepped outside the screen door where he could see me and signaled to him.

He came up the path, his black bag tucked under one arm, wiping

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the sweat band of his Panama hat with a handkerchief.

"Pretty rugged situation, Johnny," he said. "I'm not the Gibney family doctor, but I was going to offer my services. I understand that Laura is in some kind of shock." As he spoke he could see her with Lydia and Marcia, through the screen.

I guess he'd already been brought up to date but I told him how things were with Laura and about my own experiences with that kind of shock case.

"If Zack keeps hammering at her," I said, "it may close the door tight. Meanwhile—"

"She may be in real danger," Marshall said. He looked at the women. "Logically she should go to the hospital, be carefully sedated, and given a chance to come out of it with her nerve ends less raw."

"So take her to the hospital. She could be protected there." Even as I said it I thought, bitterly, the name of the hospital was The Horace Gibney Memorial Hospital.

"I can't take her out of here against her will, and I can't take her out of here without Zack's approval," Marshall said.

"Not if staying here endangers her health and sanity?"

"We can give it a try," Marshall said.

He led the way back into the screened area. He put his hat and medical bag on a table by the door. He wore his grayish hair crewcut. He reminded me of a colonel I'd had in Vietnam, a tough but compassionate man.

"I'm so sorry for your trouble, Mrs. Gibney," he said to Lydia. He nodded to the others. "Marcia—Laura."

"Hello, Dr. Fred," Laura said.

"I had to come here in my official capacity as the Town Health Officer," Marshall said. "I wondered, Mrs. Gibney, if there is any way I could be helpful to you. Unofficially, I mean."

"It's very nice of you, Doctor," Lydia said.

He smiled at Laura. "I understand you have some problems, young lady."

I saw that her lips were trembling.

"It's a pretty terrifying experience, Dr. Fred," she said, "not remembering something that happened just a little while ago and—*and not really wanting to remember!*"

"That's why you're not remembering—because you don't want to," he said, as casually as though he were discussing the weather. "You got up, you walked out into the garden, and you saw something so shocking that your mind had to blot it out. Since then you haven't relaxed for an instant. Your nerves must be tight as piano wires. There may be the simplest kind of way out of it.

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Let me take you to the hospital, place you under sedation that'll let you sleep around the clock and relax all your tensions. When you wake up it's two-to-one you'll remember everything just as clearly as though you'd never forgotten it."

Her eyelids fluttered. "I'm not sure—"

"You'll have to face it sooner or later," he said. His smile was gentle. "It would put an end to all the uncertainty here."

Laura looked at me and her eyes were brimming with tears. I could guess what she was thinking. For all her bitterness, for all her rebellion and anger, she didn't want to be the one to point a finger at anyone, friend or enemy.

"There are no uncertainties here, Doctor, that we aren't quite competent to handle," T.J.'s harsh voice said from the doorway. Emerson and Bob were just behind him. The council of war was over. "Dr. Von Glahn is on his way here. He'll look after Laura."

Von Glahn, I knew, was the Gibneys' doctor. He had recently retired as chief surgeon of The Horace Gibney Hospital.

"I prefer to have Dr. Fred take care of me," Laura said.

"Whoever takes care of you, Miss Gibney, is going to have to do it here," Zack said. He had come up behind Bob and Emerson. "Unless Dr. Marshall is prepared to state that it's actually dangerous for you to be treated here. And wherever you go, Miss Gibney, one of my men is going to be with you, in the room where you are. That memory of yours could pop back just as quickly as it popped away. I want someone on hand when that happens."

T.J. turned to Zack. "You find anything of interest among Traynor's effects?"

Zack shrugged. "Take days to go through all his notes and tapes." He looked back at Laura. "Just tell me where you'd like to settle in, Miss Gibney, so I can station a man there with you."

"You ought to go to bed," Marshall said. "You ought to take something that will relax you and let you sleep."

"Von Glahn will take care of that, thank you, Doctor," T.J. said.

"I don't want Dr. Von Glahn!" Laura said. "Have you any legal right to keep me here, Mr. Zack?"

"Yes, ma'am," Zack said. "Material witness to a homicide. Here, in the hospital, or in the county jail." He grinned at me. "Same goes for you, Palmer. It would be better here, I should think—more chance that Miss Gibney's memory may stop troubling her—here, where it happened. Nice comfortable place to wait around on a hot day."

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My mouth began to feel dry and cottony. They'd worked it out, I thought. Laura would be taken somewhere into the upper regions of the house, put to sleep, guarded by Zack, attended by Von Glahn. How simple for them! "Poor girl, she just never woke up!"

"Well, since I can't be of any help—" Dr. Marshall said. He turned toward his hat and medical bag.

"Wait!" My voice sounded so loud it startled me. "Wait, Dr. Fred!"

He looked back at me. I thought he was a little irritated at the way T.J. had brushed off his offer.

"Dr. Fred, listen to me," I said. I was aware that the entire household was staring at me. I imagined there was something diabolical about the group in the doorway—T.J., Emerson, Bob, and Zack. "There is someone here, perhaps the whole family, who can't afford to have Laura remember what she saw this morning. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, Johnny," he said quietly. "But if you're concerned for her safety, Mr. Zack has indicated she'll be under guard at all times. There'll be a trooper with her."

"Can a trooper prevent a medical murder, Dr. Fred?" I shouted at him. "Can a trooper prevent them from fixing it so that she'll never wake up? Dr. Von Glahn is T.J.'s man. Mr. Zack is T.J.'s man. These are all T.J.'s people, and they can't afford to have Laura remember. Don't you understand that?"

"Why, you crazy—" I heard Zack say softly.

For just a moment I thought there was a cloud of doubt in Dr. Marshall's eyes. Then it cleared away. He came over and put a steadying hand on my arm.

"You've got yourself worked up into hysteria, Johnny," he said. "Dr. Von Glahn is a highly reputable man. If you think he'd be a party to—oh, no, Johnny. Better take it easy."

He picked up his hat and bag and walked out into the hot sunshine. And Laura and I were now alone with the enemy.

They worked it like a well-tuned motor.

Dr. Von Glahn must have passed Dr. Fred on the driveway as he came in. He was a handsome old gent with silver-white hair and a white mustache and goatee. He'd evidently been well briefed on the phone before he'd started out. His attitude toward Laura was deferential and kindly. His suggestion for treatment was perfectly sound: rest under sedation with the hope that, properly relaxed after a period of sleep, the memory block would vanish.

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"If you will get this young lady ready for bed, Lydia—" He was an old friend, I imagined, a frequent social guest. His bedside manner was calculated to make you feel complete trust in him. I almost convinced myself that Dr. Fred had been right. Von Glahn was a man of integrity; he couldn't be bought. Laura would be safe in his care and with a trooper on guard—

Almost.

I looked around at the stone-faced T.J., at Bob who had lost all vestiges of his normal, macabre good humor, at Emerson, pale as ashes. This was not a concerned family—not concerned for Laura's safety. They were only concerned—nearly panicked—by what it was she could remember.

Lydia, moving like an automaton, put her arm around Laura and led her into the house. Laura offered no resistence. She had thrown in the towel, I thought.

Zack gave orders to Sayers in my presence. One of the troopers in the yard, a man named Getliffe, was to be placed on guard, either in or just outside Laura's room.

Marcia tagged along to help with Laura, and T.J. and his two sons and Zack retired once more to the Old Man's study. I was left alone with Mike Sayers.

"You think I'm off my rocker, don't you, Mike?"

The green-tinted glasses swiveled past me toward the study door at the far end of the great entrance hall.

"I agree with you that the Old Man is just what you think he is," he said, "but I think you're way off your rocker when you suggest that he—and the rest of the family—would harm a daughter just to keep her from remembering. And I know you're way off your rocker when you suggest that Von Glahn might be a party to it. As for Zack, he's mean, tough, sadistic—but he's a first-class investigator. Maybe he's accepted a favor here and there, but I don't think he can be bought."

"You trust this trooper Getliffe?"

"All the way," Sayers said. He took off his green glasses, blew on them, and began to wipe them with a clean handkerchief. For the first time I got a look at his level gray eyes. "You and I have seen what the top brass is like in the Service," he said. "Single-track minds. That's how they get to be Generals. And that's how you get to be rich, I guess. Ruthless and headed only in one direction. But murder your own flesh and blood?" He put his glasses back on. "I've got to get a report written up."

"No one ever understands how far they'll go," I said. He wasn't listening. "One thing. When you

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first got here this morning did you notice smoke coming out of one of the chimneys?"

"No, I didn't notice. Probably burning trash."

"At five in the morning?"

"Big birthday party last night. The cleanup lasted till after daylight, according to the help."

I didn't mention the sanitation truck to him. You may ask why not. I didn't go to Simmons, who had been the Gibneys' butler for years and who was in charge of the domestic corps, and ask him what they had been burning in the cellar incinerator at dawn. You may ask why not. So maybe I was off my rocker, but I had a feeling there would be carefully prepared answers to everything.

I was convinced that Julian Traynor had died because he had something on somebody in this big stone fortress. If there had been notes or tapes covering that "something," there was a good chance that's what had been hurriedly burned at dawn. There was a good chance too that there might be remnants of whatever it had been still in the incinerator. If I suggested that to anyone I would be guaranteeing that someone would make certain those remnants would never be found.

When we were kids we used to call the cellar under the big stone house The Catacombs. There were endless corridors and rooms, old coal bins transformed into storage areas, a carpenter shop which was a hobby of Emerson's, enormous brass boilers, furnaces, a garden room where Lydia grew seedlings under fluorescent lights, a paneled game room where there was still, I imagined, a ping-pong table and a billiard table, laundry rooms, the machinery for an elevator that had been built in when some Gibney developed a heart condition, and two hand-operated dumbwaiters that came down from the kitchen area. You could actually get lost in The Catacombs if you didn't know your way around.

One of the old coal furnaces, installed before modern conversion to oil heat, had been left for use as an incinerator. I wanted to have a look at it—just in case. I wanted to find out if someone in a hurry had neglected to make certain that everything burned in that incinerator this morning had not been reduced to ashes.

I remembered that on the north side of the house there was an outside entrance to The Catacombs. To try to go down from inside the house was to risk a head-on encounter with a member of the family, or with one of the horde of servants milling around in the kitchen area where the inside stairway went down into the cellar.

I opened the screen door and walked off the terrace into the

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now blazing sunlight. There was the faint sound of a radio going somewhere, and I saw that it came from a trooper car now parked just behind Sheila's Mercedes. A trooper, his wide-brimmed hat pulled down to shield his eyes from the sun, was slumped down behind the wheel listening to the short-wave calls, presumably from his barracks. It was obviously his job to see that none of the family cars left the grounds. There was a shiny black Cadillac parked just beyond the trooper, its license plate indicating that it was Dr. Von Glahn's.

I turned right, walking as casually and aimlessly as I could in case the trooper was watching me. A glittering reflection on the flagstone path in front of me made me look up. The sun was striking full on the big brass bell in the cupola. Horace Gibney had installed that bell almost a century ago, I remembered being told, before there were telephones in the big house, as an alarm system in case help was needed from the village.

I rounded the corner of the house. There didn't seem to be anyone in sight. From some distance away I heard the whir of a power lawn mower but no one was visible on this side of the house. A few yards away I saw the pair of heavy cellar doors, painted green. I'd have to lift them and go down a flight of stone steps to the main cellar door. If that was locked it would take a medieval battering ram to force it open.

I got to the surface doors and lifted one of them. It appeared nobody had opened them for a long time. The crevices were caked with leaves and dirt. It took all the strength I had to loosen the door and then lift it. A blast of damp cool air came up out of the stairwell.

I looked around. Still no one in sight. I went down the steps to the heavy iron-bound main door. It was almost wide enough to drive a truck through. There was an antique wrought-iron latch which stubbornly resisted being moved, but finally I worked it free, put my shoulder against the door, and pushed. After a few moments of strong pressure it gave reluctantly.

I went back up the steps and pulled the open outer door down over my head so that no one from the outside could notice that The Catcombs had been entered. As the door thudded down above me I was suddenly in pitch-darkness.

I made my way down again, my hands feeling along the damp stone wall. I had to push open the big inner door a little wider to make enough room for me to squeeze through into the cellar. It was still totally dark, but I could hear the hum of some sort

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of machinery and the faint sound of water in the pipes overhead.

There was a certain logic to the idea that there would be a light switch somewhere just inside the door, and presently I found it. One low-watt electric bulb went on in the ceiling a few yards away from me. Stacked around the walls were snow shovels, garden tools, an old toboggan and sleds which probably hadn't been used since the children had grown up. It looked like a neat attic stored with things that would never be used again in a lifetime.

But I got my bearings. A sort of wide corridor would lead the underground length of the house, with rooms opening off both sides. On the left would be Emerson's workshop, the tools, the special stacks of plywood and lumber, all kept in precise order. On the right would be the game room, with the billiard table and the ping-pong gear. On the left again would be L y d i a ' s indoor greenhouse with its fluorescent lights beaming down on the red-clay flowerpots with their eager seedlings.

As I moved along the corridor I saw the glow of that artificial sunlight throwing a cone of light across my path. Just beyond that I knew the corridor opened into a huge room which contained the converted oil burners, the hot-water tanks—and the incinerator-furnace.

I moved quickly, not bothering with lights until I passed the greenhouse and realized I was in the big utility room. I found the light switch, flipped it on, and stood facing my o b j e c t i v e. Somehow, in the cold glare of the naked light bulbs, the pipes and furnace looked like a monstrous Rube Goldberg invention.

I touched the outer surface of the old incinerator-furnace. The surface was warm, not hot. The fire that had burned something not long ago was dead. I opened the firebox door but I couldn't see anything inside. I put my face close to the opening and clicked on my cigarette lighter, and suddenly was aware of the odor of burned cloth.

I was looking for scraps of paper—notes—or bits of tape that Traynor had used in his recording machine. I couldn't see any such remains, but in one corner of the firebox my lighter disclosed a small piece of something white. I reached in and retrieved it. It was a piece of cloth, about the size of an old-fashioned pocket watch, charred around the edges.

When I looked at it closely it appeared to be a piece of toweling, or perhaps terrycloth from a robe. I stood scowling at it as my lighter slowly faded and went out. I turned to move closer to the electric-light bulb which would give me a better

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light, and the bulb went out leaving me in darkness. I spun the flint wheel on my lighter and got only sputtering sparks.

And then, instinctively, I did a rolling dive to my right across the floor.

I wasn't alone. Someone, breathing hard, had charged straight at my sparking lighter.

"Lights!" a voice said sharply.

The naked bulb came on again. On his hands and knees, at about the spot where I'd been before I rolled away, was Bob Gibney, a smear of dirt on his yellow shirtfront and on the knees of his yellow slacks.

At the door to this area, his hand on the light switch, was Emerson, squinting at me through his owlish glasses. And blocking the exit behind me, looking like a prehistoric giant, was T. J. Gibney.

"What did he find?" T.J. asked.

"Must have been a piece of the cloth left," Bob said, rising and brushing the knees of his slacks. He was smiling at me but it was a smile totally lacking in humor. "You stupid cluck!" he said. "Why couldn't you mind your own business?"

I still had the little piece of white cloth clutched in my right hand. My lighter had skidded away across the floor. I got to my feet, stuffing the piece of cloth into my jacket pocket. My right shoulder hurt where I'd banged it against the concrete floor.

Not so many months ago I'd walked into a clearing in a South Vietnam swampland and suddenly found myself surrounded by a squad of Vietcong. I knew then that I was dead. I had the same heart-clutching certainty now. In Vietnam a miracle had happened. A 'copter had swept in out of nowhere, spraying the enemy with machine-gun fire. I'd made a headlong dive into a gully, and then the chopper landed and picked me up.

There was going to be no chopper to save me here.

"Is there any point in trying to reason with him?" Emerson asked.

"Never reason with an honest man," Bob said bitterly.

"If you hadn't been an idiot and burned the damn thing Emerson," T.J. said. He was clenching his huge fists. The cellar was cool but I could see the beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Whatever you have in mind," I heard myself say, "you know you can't get away with it. How would you explain my disappearance, if that's what it's to be?"

"Suppose we ask you, Johnny," Bob said. He took a couple of tentative steps toward me. "We want that piece of cloth you found. We want your silence. We want Laura's silence. How do we get those things?"

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"There's a price," Emerson said. "There has to be a price."

"So name it, Johnny," Bob said.

"Economic security," Emerson said. "Freedom to make a life with Laura—if she'll promise to keep on forgetting."

"All he wants," T.J. said in a bitter voice, "is to get out of this cellar in one piece and start blabbing. You can't buy anything from his kind. I tell you, he'll promise anything and then talk his head off the minute he's safe."

"I'm sorry, Johnny," Bob said. "I have to agree with T.J. You're a hopeless case."

It came to me like a sudden tornado. Bob launched himself at me, a yellow streak in the semidarkness. I should have guessed how rough he could be. He'd spent his whole life staying in shape, learning the arts of violence just for the fun of it. I should have guessed he would know the techniques of karate—and of killing.

True, I had learned the countermoves by heart in special guerilla warfare training, but you have to be a special kind of person to use them without any hesitation. You temporize for just a split second, thinking that what's happening can't be true—and then it's too late.

I went hurtling over Bob Gibney's shoulder to smash into the concrete wall. He was on me almost before I could struggle to my knees. And now he wasn't alone.

T.J. had my right arm, twisting it into an agonizing lock behind my back, and I saw Emerson coming at me with some sort of iron bar or poker in his hands. Bob, directly in front of me, smashed at my face with bone-crushing fists. The pain was unbelievable. I tasted blood and my vision was a red fog.

I managed somehow to twist to one side and launch a kick at the Old Man's groin with everything I had left. I heard him scream out in agony and the paralyzing armlock was released. I saw him reel away, double over, grab at himself.

My head nearly came off my neck as Bob Gibney caught me with a haymaker right to the jaw and then I was caught in another karate chop and thrown violently against the wall again. I slid down to a sitting position, making some kind of animal sounds in an almost paralyzed throat. I saw Emerson standing over me, the iron bar raised to smash in my skull. I remember covering my head with my arms in a futile gesture of defense.

And then I heard it. The bell! The great brass bell in the cupola was ringing wildly. I saw Emerson freeze, his ashen face turned away and up. Bob, whose hand was drawn back ready for a lethal

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throat chop at my Adam's apple, was a yellow statue. A few yards away T.J. was down on his knees moaning, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!"

Then there were w o m e n ' s voices, loud and hysterical, and the clatter of feet on the wooden stairway leading down from the kitchen, and then, of all things, the glistening bald head of Manuel Zack as he leaned over me.

"What the holy hell is going on here?" I heard him ask, before I slipped away into blackness and void . . .

I opened my eyes to look up into the pale face of Dr. Von Glahn. I could feel him gently touching the bruises on my face and head, and his hands weren't steady. Sunlight was p o u r i n g through an open window, and the sun felt warm and reassuring. I tried moving and let out a yelp. There wasn't an inch of my body that wasn't in agony, but my legs and arms moved. I saw the red tip of Von Glahn's tongue moisten his lips.

"He's coming around," he said.

"Thank God," I heard a voice say; I recognized it as Sheila Gibney's.

"Don't try to sit up," Von Glahn said, as I made the effort.

But I made it. They'd stretched me out on a couch in the high-ceilinged living room, just inside from the terrace. I reached in my pocket and felt for the little piece of cloth I'd found in the incinerator. Whatever it meant, the Gibney men had been prepared to murder me in cold blood to get it.

Sheila Gibney was standing just behind the doctor. Her cat's-eyes had lost their brilliance, but like her husband just before he'd tried to kill me, she was forcing a smile.

"I told you I'd lie you into the electric chair, Johnny, if Bob was involved," she said. "You know what happened? I turned into a Swiss bellringer."

"*You* rang the bell?" I sounded as though I had a bad laryngitis. One of Bob Gibney's chopping blows had caught me in the neck.

"I had to get you h e l p somehow," she said.

"Why?"

"Before Bob was in this mess beyond recall," she said.

My own smile was internal. I couldn't move my swollen lips enough to show it. "How much deeper do you want him to get than attempted homicide?" I asked. "Those three meant to kill me. I'm not likely to let them off that hook. I was within one bellring of having my s k u l l smashed in like an eggshell." I looked at Von Glahn. "Laura?"

"Asleep. Safe," Von Glahn said.

"Can I talk to her?"

"In six or eight hours. She won't come around before that."

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I looked back at Sheila. "I'd like it if someone would tell me what this is all about," I said.

"Zack's got everyone in T.J.'s study," she said. "I was to let them know if you were able to join them."

"I can make it." I wished I hadn't tried when I stood up.

I walked across what seemed like miles of entrance hall to the door of the study. Sheila knocked and Mike Sayers promptly opened it from the inside.

It was a beautiful book-lined room, furnished with heavy green-leather furniture—couches and armchairs—and a huge flat-topped desk carved by some Florentine artist.

Bob and Emerson were sitting side by side on one of the couches, like two schoolboys called into the principal's office. I noticed, with some satisfaction, that Bob's handsome face was a little chewed up.

T.J., looking a little green, was sitting in the tremendous armchair behind his desk, his heavy eyelids almost closed. I knew he was aware of my entrance but he made no sign, spoke no words. Lydia, her eyes shielded by the black glasses against the sunlight that streamed through the east windows, sat like a motionless statue in a straight-backed chair across the room from her husband. A little nerve kept jerking under one high cheekbone.

Manuel Zack stood just behind T.J.'s chair, his face deadpan. Off to the right of the desk a trooper sat in front of a stenotype machine. Mike Sayers guarded the door.

Zack looked at me. "You okay?"

"Guess again," I said.

"Find yourself a place to sit," he said.

Sheila, who had come in with me, touched my arm and we sat down together on the empty couch which faced her husband and Emerson.

"We're just getting started here," Zack said. "Read back from the beginning."

The stenotype operator fingered the paper tape. "Question: You care to make a statement, Mr. Gibney? T. J. Gibney: I'm ready. Mr. Zack: Go ahead then. T. J. Gibney: I killed Julian Traynor. I arranged to meet him at the pool during the party. When everybody was in bed he went down for a swim and I followed him a few minutes later. Mr. Zack: Was it daylight? T. J. Gibney: It was just getting light."

There was something eerie about listening to the words read in the trooper's monotone voice.

"Mr. Zack: You went down to the pool prepared to kill him? T. J. Gibney: I was prepared to kill him. I went to the tool shed first and got those garden shears. Unless I could make Traynor

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listen to reason I meant to kill him. Mr. Zack: Reason with him about what?" The trooper looked up. "That's as far as we'd gotten, Mr. Zack."

"All right, I repeat the question, T.J.," Zack said. "Reason with him about what?"

The heavy eyelids lifted. "He was blackmailing me," T.J. said. "I had to arrange for a payoff that I knew he would honor, or get rid of him, permanently."

"What did he have on you?"

"Don't be a fool, Zack. If I would risk killing him to keep it a secret, am I likely to tell you what it was now? We talked about a money payoff and he just laughed at me. He wanted more than money. He wanted power and position. I saw that I was saddled with him for the rest of my life, so—so I ran him through with the shears."

"And then?"

"I threw away the gloves I was wearing, left the shears there on the grass, and came back to the house."

"Were you aware that Miss Laura Gibney had seen you?"

T.J.'s mouth twitched. "No, I wasn't."

"What happened then?"

"I woke my two sons and told them what I'd done. I needed their help."

"Help to do what?"

"To get rid of Traynor's body, for one thing. He'd been planning to go into New York. I thought of dressing the body, putting it in his car, and then wrecking the car somewhere down the line."

"You said, 'for one thing.' What other thing?"

"He had evidence of what he was holding over me. Certain documents—and I thought he might have made a tape in case anything happened to him. I told Emerson to look for those items and to burn them if he found them."

"And did he do what you asked?"

"Yes. He found the evidence and he burned it in the incinerator in the cellar. Bob and I went out to deal with the body. We were too late. My daughter and Johnny Palmer had already discovered it."

"So you decided to frame one or both of them and you called me and you fed me a large wad of malarkey," Zack said, his voice angry.

"I had to throw you off the trail. If Laura and Johnny really got cornered I'd have come forward," T.J. said.

"You say!" Zack said, his voice rising. "But you and your sons were ready to kill again when you found Palmer nosing around the incinerator."

"Let me make one thing clear to you," T.J. said grimly. "If Emerson botched the burning of that evidence and Palmer found it I had the same situation on

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my hands all over again."

"And your sons were willing to help you kill Palmer?"

"To get back the evidence. To make certain," T.J. said.

"It must have been quite a thing that Julian Traynor found out about you," Zack said. He turned to Emerson. "What exactly was it you burned, Mr. Gibney?"

Emerson moistened his lips. "Some—some papers and—and a tape," he said.

"Did Palmer have parts of those papers and that tape when you found him in the basement?"

"We—we thought he must have," Emerson said.

Zack turned to me. "What *did* you find, Palmer?"

T.J. and his two sons were staring at me. I had the feeling they were silently pleading with me not to speak. I didn't feel kindly toward them, to make the understatement of the year. I reached in my pocket and took out the small piece of charred toweling.

"*That's* what you found?" Zack asked, his eyes widening.

"That's all there was," I said. "The rest was ashes."

"And they tried to kill you for *that?*"

There was a kind of choking sound. I turned my head and I saw that it had come from Lydia. She had risen from her chair, her hands locked, her knuckles white.

"I'm sorry to have caused you so much trouble and the loss of so much time," she said in an oddly reasonable voice.

"Lydia, stop it!" T.J. bellowed at her.

Bob and Emerson were on their feet. "Forget it, Mother," Bob said. "There's a way to ride this out. Trust us."

Lydia ignored the men in her family. "That little piece of cloth, Mr. Zack, is the remains of a terrycloth coat of mine. It was rather h o r r i b l y bloodstained, which is why the boys burned it. You see, I killed J u l i a n Traynor."

T.J. lowered his head onto his clenched fists resting on the desk. His big shoulders heaved. We all watched, hypnotized, as Lydia moved to him and put one of her hands on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, my darling," Lydia said gently. She made an unexpected gesture. She rolled up the sleeve of her sweater and held out her arm toward Zack. "As you can see, Mr. Zack, I have been a narcotics addict for some time."

"Oh, God," Bob Gibney said, and turned toward Sheila. There were tears in his eyes and I saw Sheila hold out her hand to him.

"I would prefer, in a more private moment, to give you the details—if you must have them, Mr. Zack," Lydia said. "I have had problems in my life—with alcohol and—and with o t h e r

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things." Her hand tightened on T.J.'s shoulder. "When Julian came to live here while he worked on the Gibney book I liked him. He seemed such a kindly, warm, understanding young man, full of gentle humor. I—I found myself thrown with him a great deal, and of course he had many questions to ask me about T.J.—all quite natural. I was almost old enough to be his mother, you understand.

"Then one day he discovered my secret—a secret I thought I'd managed to keep from my family. I expected, if anything, help and sympathy from him. Instead he became a kind of monster. He found a way to control my supply." Her mouth trembled. "He forced me to become his creature. I must come to his room whenever he said so. I must meet him in New York whenever he said so. I—I became his slave. I—I have been quietly going out of my mind.

"I say, he had found a way to control my supply of heroin. Last night, before the party, I needed it desperately. He held out on me. He said he would give it to me when the party was over. I was to meet him at the pool where we could be alone. He implied there would be new demands—money demands. I knew he would ask for more than I could give him without T.J.'s finding out the truth. I could not bear to have that happen."

She touched T.J.'s bearded cheek with her fingers. "T.J. would have believed I could stop by sheer will power. It meant cold turkey. You know what that means, Mr. Zack?

"I guess I went a little out of my mind. I decided I couldn't stand another day of Julian—not another hour of him. So I decided, quite unhysterically, to kill him. After the party I changed into some garden clothes and my terrycloth coat. It was quite cool just before morning. I went to the tool shed and got a pair of gloves and the shears and then went to the pool to wait for him.

"Julian wasn't surprised to see the shears and the garden gloves. I often did work in my garden in the dawn hours. I—I don't sleep well." She took a deep breath, then went on, "He told me what his new demands were—the money—and how it was to be delivered to him. And I sat beside him, listening, and I told myself I would —I would count to ten and then I would kill him. So I began to count, slowly, to myself. And—and when I came to ten I—I plunged the shears into his body.

"He—he tumbled backwards into the pool, but as he fell—well, blood spurted out of him and all over my terrycloth coat. I dropped the shears and threw away the gloves. And then—"

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She suddenly lifted her hands and covered her face, her whole body shaking as though she'd had some kind of seizure. But she c o n t r o l l e d it. "And then somebody started screaming and I looked up the bank toward the house, and there was Laura. I cried out to her and she turned away from me. I—I started up after her and when I got to the top of the bank T.J. came running out of the house and then Bob and Emerson were there. And I told them." Again the d e e p breath.

"They got me into the house and Emerson took my blood-stained coat and T.J. kept telling me he'd protect me and the truth need never come out and that surely Laura could be persuaded to keep silent when she knew the truth. But—but when they found Laura, Johnny was with her and Laura had gone into shock, and there was no way of telling what would happen when she came out of it. We could only wait and see.

"I've sometimes thought T.J.'s way of handling things was—was evil. But in all honesty I hoped he would be successful this time. I—I have no regrets about killing Julian Traynor. He was—he was monstrous." She drew another deep breath. "And that's the way it was, Mr. Zack."

No one spoke. No one moved for a few moments, and then T.J. got up from his chair and put an arm around his wife.

"I would have protected you from this, any way on earth, Lydia," he said. He looked over the top of her head at us. "She was driven beyond endurance by that blackguard!" he said. "There must be a way we can help her." He looked at me. "Johnny, I'm sorry. We've all gone a little out of our heads, I guess. When you found that piece of cloth we knew that sooner or later it would be traced to my wife. We were all ready to do anything on earth to save her. I would have smashed you or anyone else in the world to save her."

He meant it. He would have taken the rap for her if she had let him.

"I won't complicate your situation, Mr. Gibney, by bringing charges against you and your sons—on one condition," I said.

"What condition?"

"I'd like to wait in Laura's room till she wakes up," I said. "I'd like to be with her then. If she wakes up remembering, it's going to be a very bad time for her."

Lydia looked at me, and two large tears were running down under the rims of her black glasses. "She may never want to lay eyes on me again, Johnny. Be kind to her. Please, be kind to her."

"I promise," I said.

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a *NEW* Dr. Coffee *NOVELET* by

LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

Hooray! Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee, chief pathologist and director of laboratories at Pasteur Hospital, Northbank, U.S.A., and his assistant, Dr. Motilal Mookerji, and Lieutenant Max Ritter of Northbank's Homicide Squad return to EQMM—after much too long an absence.

Usually we avoid scheduling two stories with basically similar backgrounds in the same issue; but this time we are deliberately doing so. Hugh Pentecost's new short novel, "Blood-Red in the Morning," gives one view of hippies and what they stand for; Lawrence G. Blochman's new novelet, "Missing: One Stage-Struck Hippie," gives a different view of those of the younger generation who are "infatuated with the disillusioned, the dispossessed, the bewildered." The contrast between the two stories will make you thoughtful and uneasy—and, we hope, concerned . . .

Now, to quote Dr. Coffee's assistant, "the criminous enigma of lady with poisoned hair" . . .

MISSING: ONE STAGE-STRUCK HIPPIE

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

NORTHBANK LAY GASPING UNder the prickly, suffocating blanket of August. As the Northbank police station was not air-conditioned, the doors to the squad room and the office of Detective Lieutenant Max Ritter beyond were wide-open, courting any vagrant breeze.

Ritter did not hear the stranger come in. When he looked up, the apparition already loomed in the doorway. The Lieutenant blinked and looked again. The apparition was still there. Implausible though it certainly seemed, it must be real.

Although the man was as tall

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as a basketball center and as broad as an All-American lineman, his dimensions did not strike the detective until second glance. Ritter's first impression focused on one fanatical eye gleaming above a fierce tangle of red beard. The other eye was smothered by long carroty hair combed on the bias across a bulging forehead.

Lucite buttons as big as silver dollars glittered on his emerald-green shirt. His denim trousers might have been sprayed on, and his Javanese sandals were bright with gilt. He carried a corduroy jacket over one arm.

Ritter swallowed. His Adam's apple bobbed in his long throat. When the bobbing had stopped he asked, "Can we help you, buster?"

"I sincerely hope so," said the apparition. The resonant, cultured voice emerged from his garish jester's rig like a bass organ note from a tinny harmonica. "I'm desperately in need of assistance in tracing my fiancée."

Lieutenant Ritter smiled sadly but tolerantly as though to say: errant fiancées are two for a quarter around here, but we'll do our best. "Missing Persons," he said, "is just down the hall."

"Yes, I know. I've just come from there. They've been very helpful. Checked the hospitals and that sort of thing. But they don't share my conviction that Phyllis has met with foul play. This is the Homicide Bureau, isn't it?"

Ritter nodded. When he saw that the apparition was on the point of sitting down, he stood up, but he was too late to move the extra chair out of the line of airflow from the buzzing fan. He was pleasantly surprised when the expected New Left effluvia did not materialize.

"What makes you think baby doll has been given the works?" asked the detective. "Did she, to coin a phrase, frequent unsavory characters? Did she smoke pot or sniff glue or roll drunks?"

"Please." The red beard advanced halfway across Ritter's desk. "Can I hope to convince you that I'm deadly serious? My name is Brown—Tiberius Brown. My home is in San Francisco. My fiancée's name is Phyllis Emerson."

He fumbled in the pocket of his jacket and produced a Kodacolor snapshot which he dropped in front of Ritter. "She came to Northbank about six weeks ago. She wrote me every other day until suddenly, about ten days ago, her letters stopped coming. I wired her. No answer. I tried to reach her by telephone—unsuccessfully."

Ritter studied the photo. It was a full-face shot of a girl with straight blonde hair that dangled to extreme length on both sides of her head. She wore a baby-blue

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turtleneck sweater and earrings like something by Calder out of Brancusi. The detective was puzzled by what seemed to be conflicting traits in the girl's face: sensual lips and a stern, determined chin; wistful blue eyes and an imperious tilt of the nose; the dreamer and the activist; the romantic and the aggressive realist.

"Why would anyone want her dead?" Ritter asked bluntly.

"I can't imagine." Tiberius Brown spread his hands. "But why should she stop writing? Where is she?"

"Maybe she left for Hanoi or Havana or some place like that," said Ritter. He didn't smile. Neither did Tiberius Brown, who shook his head vigorously.

"She would have written me," he said.

"Did she have any connection with Northbank's boy militant who got himself arrested in San Francisco a few months ago for raising hell and inciting to riot on the campus of Farwestern University? Simon Gallick. When he got out of the clink he came back here and married a screwball heiress."

"Everybody at Farwestern knew Gallick, of course. But Phyllis was not the political type."

"Look," Ritter said. "Begin at the beginning. What was Phyllis doing in Northbank? Why did she leave the Coast without you? And who the hell are you anyhow?"

Tiberius Brown seemed to swell with dignity. His red beard rose to point directly at Ritter as he leaned farther across the desk.

"I have told you that my name is Tiberius Brown. I am an instructor in Elizabethan and Restoration drama at Farwestern University in California. I am also director of the Dionysian Little Theatre in San Francisco. I've—"

"And Phyllis Emerson was a student of yours?" Ritter interrupted.

"She was registered in my course on Wycherley and the Restoration dramatists, yes. She was also one of the Dionysian Players."

"Was she living with you?" Ritter was again blunt.

"We've been very much in love for more than a year."

"Why don't you get married then?"

"We agreed to wait until I had my Ph.D. There's no future in an academic career without a doctorate, and I'm still working on my thesis."

"But she loved you—was nuts about you?"

"Definitely."

"Then why did she hightail it to Northbank without you? Why didn't you come with her?"

"I was giving a summer course at Farwestern while writing my thesis."

"You still haven't told me what she was doing in Northbank."

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"Haven't I? Well, she was offered bit parts in the summer-stock company here. She's crazy about the theater, so she came."

"Who made the offer?" Ritter asked.

"Don Sutherland. He's director of the summer playhouse here."

"Doesn't Sutherland know where she is?"

"No. He says she was ailing and dropped out of the cast last week."

"Like how? Was she on acid or something? Maybe she was having withdrawal symptoms."

"Nothing like that. Sutherland said she was having nauseous spells during rehearsals. He thought it was just nerves or the hot weather. Then she stopped coming around."

"And he didn't check when she didn't show?"

"He called the hotel where she was supposed to be staying and was told she was not registered. The Northbank Hilltop. I got the same answer. Apparently she just went there to write me on the hotel's stationery. You can understand now why I'm not only apprehensive but desperate."

Ritter nodded. He picked up the photo of Phyllis Emerson and studied it again. "You still don't give me a reason why anybody should want her dead," he remarked, "but maybe I can dig up one on my own. Where can I reach you, Professor?"

"I'm at the Hilltop—just in case she should turn up there. I would appreciate any help, Lieutenant."

"Keep in touch," said Ritter. "I'll keep this snapshot."

He got up as the bearded giant strode through the squad room and watched him start down the stairs.

"Brody," he called to a detective who had looked up from his two-finger typing of a report (in triplicate) to stare at Brown. "Stay on his tail." Ritter pointed. He spoke in a stage whisper. "Hilltop Hotel."

Although Ritter told himself that Tiberius Brown's fears for the life of a kook like Phyllis Emerson did not really make the girl a prime concern of the Homicide Squad, the interview had somehow left him with an uneasy feeling. Something about the person and personality of the Bearded One didn't ring true, even though it was not strange that a junior pundit of Restoration Drama (whatever that was) should take on the protective coloring of the querulous generation. He was not completely surprised, therefore, when Brody called in forty minutes later to report.

"I lost him, Chief. He didn't go to the Hilltop Hotel like you said. He headed for Southbank first thing, and I lost him in the bridge traffic. I got his license number, though. He was driving

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a rented car, and the rental people say he gave his address as the YMCA, not the Hilltop. The Y people say he's not registered there either. Want me to call in the Southbank cops?"

"No. Come on in."

That settled it. Inasmuch as homicide in Northbank was in the *summer doldrums* for the moment, Ritter decided to invade the province of the Missing Persons Bureau. If his hunch proved wrong, nothing was lost. Slipping the Kodacolor image of Phyllis Emerson into his pocket, he drove to the Northbank Summer Playhouse which was housed in a deserted schoolhouse just outside of town.

He found Donald Sutherland waving his arms at two eager but slow-witted actresses on the schoolhouse stage. Sutherland was an exceedingly pretty young man. His carefully waved golden hair rippled back from a broad unruffled brow. His smooth pink cheeks dimpled when he smiled. The way his bell-bottomed candy-striped trousers clung to his posterior could only be described as callipygian. His gestures were extravagant and fluttery as he directed the rehearsal, yet he was not even perspiring. He interrupted the scene to answer the detective's questions.

"Yes, of course I know Phyllis Emerson. Good heavens! I hope nothing has happened to her."

"That's what I want to know. When did you see her last?"

"Let's see now . . . four mornings ago. She'd been feeling seedy for several days before that. I told her to go see my doctor. She didn't go, though. I called the doctor. I called her hotel, too. No answer. She may have gone back to the Coast."

"Think she was well enough to travel?" Ritter asked.

"Oh, I think so. Probably just nerves and the hot weather. She's pretty high-strung—like a lot of stage-struck kids who have more ego than talent."

"Why'd you hire her if she's no good?"

"Oh, she's not all that bad. She's adequate for walk-ons and bit parts, but I did *not* hire her. She offered to come with me for the summer at no salary—just for the experience."

"I hear her fiancé came to see you," said Ritter.

"Fiancé?" Sutherland frowned.

"Professor Tiberius Brown of Farwestern University."

"Oh, him!" The Sutherland dimples reappeared, but his smile was not even lip-deep.

"Is Brown a phony?"

"I wouldn't say that exactly, but he's not really a man of the theater either. Of the library, rather. He smells of old books. He's wandered into the wrong century. I think—he belongs to the Seventeenth. He tries hard to

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live in the Twentieth, but he's miscast. He can't create the *illusion*. He's just a ham in a costume play."

"But Phyllis Emerson goes for him?"

Sutherland shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I've never inquired into her private emotions. Now if you'll excuse me—"

"Just a minute. You said you tried to telephone Phyllis. Where?"

"At the Hilltop Hotel."

"Brown says she's not registered there."

"She's registered there all right, but not under her own name. She doesn't want her family to come and drag her home. I promised I'd keep her secret, but since you're from the police . . . Just ask for Ellen Terry or Minnie Maddern Fiske or Adrienne Lecouvreur."

"I'll do that," said Ritter.

Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee, chief pathologist and director of laboratories at Pasteur Hospital, squinted into the twin lenses of his binocular microscope and made small clucking sounds as he twisted the focusing knobs.

"Dr. Mookerji," he called, "will you come here and look at this section of a bile duct? I'm sure you've seen plenty like it in India."

Dr. Motilal Mookerji, rotund resident pathologist, Calcutta's gift to Northbank, waddled across the laboratory. Flicking the tail of his pink turban over one shoulder, he sat down beside his chief. His plump brown fingers moved the tiny rectangle of glass under the nose of the microscope.

"Quite!" he said. "Clonorchiasis. Am wagering deceased was G.I. Joe. Yes?"

"Yes," said Dr. Coffee. "Home a year from Vietnam. He shouldn't have died. If whatever dumbbell treated him had sent the lab the proper specimen, we'd have seen eggs by the thousands. Then we could have told his doctor to clean out the trematodes with gentian violet instead of treating the poor guy for infectious hepatitis. True, we never used to see these liver flukes here in the Middle West, but with three-quarters of a million troops eventually coming home from Asia, doctors all over the country had better learn to be on the lookout for about fifty kinds of tropical parasites they never saw before . . . Oh, hello, Max."

Lieutenant of Detectives Max Ritter had made an unannounced entrance into the pathology lab. Ritter felt very much at home in the laboratory, for he had for years considered Dr. Coffee as his private medical examiner. Northbank was still burdened with the coroner system, in which the coroner, an elected official, was always more skilled in politics

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than in forensic medicine. Ritter unceremoniously parked himself on a corner of Dr. Coffee's desk, pushed his dark felt hat to the back of his head, and saluted with a casual wave of his hand.

"Hi, Doc," he said. "Hi, Swami." He pulled a sheaf of dog-eared envelopes from his pocket. "I got problems."

"More felonious homicides, no doubt," said Dr. Mookerji.

"I ain't sure," said the detective, "but I could do with some advice. It's this way." And he started to outline the strange story of the missing stage-struck hippie, her disappearing red-bearded fiancé, and the dimpled, golden-haired director of the summer playhouse.

"I checked at the Hilltop Hotel where Phyllis Emerson is registered as Adrienne Lecouvreur who they tell me died two hundred years ago," he said. "The desk clerk is new and never saw the gal, but the manager let me in her room. Nobody seems to remember when she's in it last, but one thing is sure—when she leaves it, she doesn't expect to be gone long. Her feathered mules are still under the bed, her see-through nightgown is still hanging on the back of a chair, and her toothbrush is still in a glass in the bathroom. But no sign of Phyllis."

"What's all this got to do with pathology, Max?"

"It's like this," Ritter said. "The gal quit Sutherland's troupe because she got sick. In the mornings. When I get into her room I find a couple of doctors' names scribbled on the cover of the phone book." He consulted the back of an envelope and read off two names. "Would one of these M.D.'s just happen to be an abortionist, Doc?"

The pathologist glanced at the envelope. "They're G.U. men, so I have no doubt that both have at some time done a therapeutic abortion. But they're also reputable physicians and neither would risk his license to perform a clandestine D and C. Still, she might have tried. What does she look like, this girl?"

The detective produced the Kodacolor snapshot. Dr. Coffee studied it for a moment, then phoned each of the doctors. Neither remembered a girl answering Phyllis Emerson's description coming in for a consultation.

"My advice to you, Max, is to have this picture copied and give it to all the newspapers," Dr. Coffee said.

The picture of Phyllis Emerson was in all the morning editions, blown up to two-or three-column size. It was also on the early morning television news in living color.

The phone calls were already

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coming in when Max Ritter reported for the morning shift. Nearly half the calls were from cranks—the usual quota of exhibitionists who are drawn to a front-page story like maggots to cheese. The other calls were from people honestly trying to be helpful, and these required patient legwork to check out. Because a news photo has a tendency to impose its own features on a remembered face, all leads wound up in dead ends—until noon.

"Homicide. Leiutenant Ritter."

"Hi, Max. This is Jerry Fry, Southbank. Remember me?"

"Sure, Jerry. Haven't seen you since we worked together on that WAC murder. What's on your mind?"

"I think I got a make on that gal you're looking for—the one in the morning papers."

"Phyllis Emerson?"

"Yeah. I saw her three-four days ago getting out of a cab on this side of the river."

"You sure?"

"I'd bet on it. She was on her way to the Love Farm—the Gallick place. Know where that is?"

"Who doesn't? Look, Jerry, that's outside my jurisdiction, but I'm coming over anyway to smell around. If I need help I'll send up a smoke signal."

Ritter had never set foot on the Gallick "Love Farm," he reflected as he drove toward the War Memorial Bridge, but he was familiar enough with its denizens who often crossed the river to burn draft cards or join protest marches. The "farm" was the creation of Mrs. Zona Billworth Gallick, a rebel in mink. She was the daughter of Jonathan Billworth, manufacturer of plumbing fixtures, who made his first million pioneering the nonwhite toilet bowl. She could never forgive her father for having become filthy rich exploiting the hypocrisy of a society so ashamed of its natural functions that it surrounded them with a phony self-conscious beauty.

Zona's embittered filial protest took the form of spending as much of his ill-gotten gains as she could on relevant causes, such as buying an abandoned farmhouse across the river and converting it into a communal pad for Northbank's hippies and yippies. As a further protest against the Billworth bowls in pastel shades, she refused to install indoor plumbing in the old farmhouse. Her love children got along with the original outhouse in the backyard.

Zona's crowning act of defiance of Papa Billworth and his obscene millions was her marriage to Simon Gallick, the campus extremist. Gallick had become a fledgling revolutionary when he was thrown out of Northbank University in his sophomore year.

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The charges against him were threefold. He had been caught cheating in an Elementary Russian exam. He had flunked resoundingly in nine hours of credits—political science, economics, and American history. He had been apprehended by campus police while planting Cannabis Sativa (marijuana) in the Dean's flower garden.

Max Ritter had seen and heard Simon Gallick in action. While he considered the young man a physical mess, he had to admit that the punk possessed a peculiar perversive charm—perhaps pervasive and persuasive as well as perversive. His high-pitched voice rose, in his most hortatory moments, to heights of demagogic frenzy. His harangues were as rich in emotion as they were empty of substance, but he could make New Left clichés sound like pearls of wisdom. And he flitted (at Zona's expense) from campus to campus and coast to coast, like a wandering dervish strewing tacks on the seats of learning—until, after his latest incarceration in San Francisco, Zona (who was terrified of flying) bailed him out, brought him home, and married him.

There was a chain across the access road to the Love Farm. Ritter dropped it and drove up to the front door of the dilapidated farmhouse. Zona had not done much rehabilitation. Paint was peeling, shutters hung at crazy angles, cardboard and tar paper patched broken windows. The arid soil was knee-deep in weeds, but paper flowers garlanded the front door. A Vietcong flag hung limp on the hot steamy air.

In the front yard half a dozen fat girls and gangling young men were busy painting signs, obviously in preparation for picketing that week's state convention of the American Legion which was to be addressed by an Assistant Secretary of Defense. Two were modeling an Uncle Sam with bloodstained hands. The group stopped work and stared at Ritter.

Ritter strode through the hostile hippies and made straight for the barn, where a red Jaguar was parked next to a black Cadillac adorned with psychedelic symbols. He looked inside the cars, then climbed a ladder to the hayloft. Nothing. The long-haired boys and ratty-looking girls were clustered about the foot of the ladder when he came down.

"You pig," screamed one of them.

"I'm a police officer," said Ritter. "Where's your high priest?"

Silence.

"I'm looking for the Gallicks."

"They're not here."

"A lie. That's Zona's Cad and Simon's Jag over there."

"They don't talk to pigs," said a barefoot fat girl.

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"They'll talk to me."

"Better put on your helmet. Si's in bad humor today," said one.

"Where's your mace?" another demanded.

There was a chorus of rude lip noises and one-syllable words as Ritter walked toward the farmhouse. The noise brought the Gallicks to the front door.

"What do you want?" demanded Zona. She was a tall gawky girl, but her skinny thighs did not deter her from wearing jeans that were scarcely more than a faded blue-fringed G-string. Her tussah silk blouse was properly grimy, but the Ban the Bomb medallion that dangled from the end of her Sicilian amber love beads—an inverted trident of rubies in a circlet of platinum-mounted diamonds—had been made to order by Cartier's or Tiffany's. She wore huge violet sunglasses that hid half her face like a wrap-around windshield and made her buttonhole mouth seem even smaller than it was.

"I'm looking for a blue-eyed blonde named Phyllis Emerson," Ritter said. "I understand she's here. I'm a police officer."

"Wrong again, pig," said Simon Gallick, releasing Zona's hand to step forward. He was nearly a head shorter than his wife despite the extra inches supplied by his hair which rose in a sooty fright wig. His face was weasel-like and the upside-down crescent of a tired dark mustache drooled dismally around the corners of his mouth. His walk was the standard slow-motion lope of his kind, hands slanted into the front pockets of his levis as though caressing his lower abdomen. "Nobody here by that name."

"Take a look at this." Ritter unfolded the front page of a morning paper.

Gallick shook his head. Zona, looking over her shoulder, said. "We've never seen her."

"Let me refresh your memories. She came here in a taxi a few days ago. She's from California."

"She's not here."

"Mind if I go in and look around? Or shall I dig up the cabbie and get a search warrant?"

"Go ahead and look," Gallick said. "Or do you want to throw in a few tear-gas grenades first?"

The detective walked in. He gingerly traversed several rooms on which mattresses and rumpled blankets were heaped on the floor. Trailing a noisome odor to the rear of the house, he found that the kitchen had been converted into a laboratory for the manufacture of stink bombs, probably to greet the Assistant Secretary of Defense. When he opened a cupboard door, a kitten-size rat jumped out, knocking over several cans and then scurrying silently away. He climbed rickety stairs, poked into dark corners, opened doors, and discovered

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nothing more than another rat.

"Satisfied, pig?" Gallick said when he came down.

"No," said Ritter. "I've seen better sties."

Zona let out a string of epithets.

"Now, now. Be nice, or we'll keep the TV cameras away from your next demonstration."

"See you from the barricades"—followed by another sequence of epithets.

"A pleasure," said Ritter, grinning.

He hurried from the house while he could still control his itch to take a poke at the "Love Farm's" leader. He was steaming, physically and mentally, as he strode through the tall weeds. Suddenly he stopped, bent to investigate a gleam of reflected sunlight that had caught his eye. He picked up a lucite button as big as a silver dollar. He turned it over. A few green threads clung to the under side.

He hesitated, started to turn back, changed his mind. When he reached his car he switched on his radio and ordered an all-points broadcast for the Thunderbird that Tiberius Brown had rented.

Ritter had scarcely returned to his desk when his phone rang.

"This is Dan Coffee, Max. I've been trying to reach you for more than an hour. I think I've located that blue-eyed blonde."

"You think? You're not sure, Doc?"

"Well, she's here in the hospital, but she's not blonde."

"You mean she's dyed her hair, Doc?"

"I mean she hasn't any hair. She's bald."

The startled sound that Ritter made could have been a bark. "Has she been scalped, Doc? Or was she wearing a wig?"

"She's been poisoned, Max, and I'm afraid she's in pretty bad shape. Better get right over here in case she has a lucid moment."

Ritter went through six red lights with his siren going all the way to Pasteur Hospital.

"Am I too late?" he gasped as he charged into the pathology lab.

Dr. Coffee shook his head. "She's hanging on, but she's in shock and in a coma. She can't talk."

"Think she'll make it?"

Again the pathologist shook his head. "They've given her stomach lavage and tried chelation with dimercaprol, but—"

"Hold on, Doc. Translate."

"My tentative diagnosis," said Dr. Coffee, "based on the loss of hair, is selenium or thallium poisoning. Thallium, which is the more probable, is a heavy metal. When metallic ions are inactivated by some other substance, the process is called chelation. That's what was tried. I'm afraid

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however, that her body had already absorbed more than a toxic dose. As little as one one-hundredth of an ounce can be fatal."

"Let's go back, Doc. How did she get here?"

"I understand that emergency got an ambulance call this morning from the Northbank Summer Playhouse—"

"From a guy named Don Sutherland?"

"I think that was the name."

"Why in hell didn't he call the police?"

"I wouldn't know, Max. I'm just a pathologist, remember. He told the ambulance intern that when he came to the theater this morning he found the girl lying on the stage near the footlights. She was comatose. She had been vomiting on the proscenium and this man—Sutherland?—thought she had been sleeping off a drunk until he noticed blood in the vomitus. Then he called for an ambulance."

"Sounds fishy to me," Ritter said. "Or don't you think so?"

"That's your job, Max. My primary interest is in identifying the poison so that I can keep her alive, if possible. Luckily the ambulance intern brought me a sample of the vomitus, and Dr. Mookerji is doing a chemical analysis now. It's a complicated affair, though, and will take several days. Meanwhile I'm getting a spectrographic analysis from the lab at Northbank University. They have the equipment, and it's much quicker."

"What am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

"You know your own routine, Max. Keep in touch with me, and—" The phone rang. "Pathology," said Dr. Coffee. Yes, Doctor . . . I see. Just now? . . . Okay, I'll get authorization for an autopsy." He replaced the instrument with great deliberation. "Max, Phyllis Emerson is dead."

"Do I get a John Doe warrant for homicide?"

"I doubt very much that it was suicide. It's such an unpleasant, messy way to die. Does she have family?"

"On the Coast. I'll pass the word."

The Missing Persons Bureau of the San Francisco police department was very much interested in Ritter's telephone call. Phyllis Emerson had indeed been on their list for weeks. Her parents hadn't reported her when she first disappeared. They thought she had simply gone off on one of her periodic demonstrations to prove that she belonged to another generation and was beholden to no one. They weren't worried. She had left home before, but had come back after holing up for a week or so in the Haight-Fillmore district.

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"When we couldn't locate her there, we sent out queries to Los Angeles, Chicago, New York—all the hippie meccas. We never thought of Nothbank."

"Did her parents say anything about her possible love life," Ritter asked. "Wasn't she supposed to be engaged? Did she have any boy friends?"

The voice at the other end of the transcontinental line gave a cultured chuckle. Its owner was probably a recent graduate of the Criminology Department at Berkeley. He chose his words carefully. "According to her father, there was no romantic attachment, but of course the parents are always the last to know. Phyllis Emerson, said her father, was heart-loose and fancy-free. Her only love affair was with her generation. She was infatuated with the disillusioned, the dispossessed, the bewildered. I'm sure her father will fly out as soon as I give him the bad news."

"Try to hold him until after the autopsy," Ritter said, "so we can get the girl a wig. She was poisoned bald-headed. Call me if you dig up anything."

He had scarcely finished his conversation when the phone rang.

"You the fella looking for that blonde cutie who had her pitcher in the papers this morning?" a man's voice asked.

"I was," said Ritter, "but we've found her."

"Oh. Then you tell her when she comes back to pick up her stuff that she owes me three bucks for cleaning up the mess in her cabin."

"Who's this speaking?"

"I'm Sam Tullinger, manager of the Riverside Motel out on River Road and Garfield."

"I'm afraid Miss Emerson won't be back, Mr. Tullinger—"

"Emerson? She registered as Minnie Fiske."

"Same gal, I'm sure. Have you cleaned up the cabin yet?"

"Not yet. I just looked inside when I seen her pitcher. She wasn't there."

"Then don't touch a thing. Don't let anybody in the cabin. I'll be right out," Ritter said.

He took off as soon as he could assemble a crew of technicians. He knew the Riverside Motel, having, with Dr. Coffee's help, once solved a particularly diabolic murder there. The motel had changed hands in the interim, the former manager having been the last man to die in the electric chair before the state abolished capital punishment.

Sam Tullinger, the present manager, was prepared to be uncooperative until Lieutenant Ritter paid the three-dollar cleaning fee out of his own pocket.

"What about the rent?" Ritter wanted to know.

"Miss Fiske paid a week in advance."

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"Mrs. Fiske died thirty-odd years ago. Miss Emerson just died today. When did she rent the cabin?"

"Two-three days ago. Want the exact date?"

"Later. Who brought her here?"

"A taxi."

"Nobody with her? No man?"

"Nope. She was alone when she come in."

"No men came to see her while she was here?"

"I wouldn't know. I don't play Big Brother to my tenants."

"You never noticed a man with a big red beard?"

"I said I mind my own business. I—now wait a minute. Last night a hippie type with a red beard and a green shirt drove up in a Thunderbird while I was looking after some Legionnaires. He started to get out of the car, then changed his mind and got back in and drove off."

"Did he have a girl with him?"

"I didn't see nobody else in the car. This guy with a beard acted drunk to me, but I didn't pay too much attention. We been pretty busy these days with the state Legion convention starting tomorra."

"When did Miss Emerson—or Fiske, as you call her—leave?"

"I wouldn't know. I didn't know she was gone when I saw her pitcher in the paper. Then I went down to look in Cabin Fourteen and she wasn't there. So I called you."

Ritter accompanied Sam Tullinger to Cabin Fourteen where the photographers and fingerprint men were already busy. He noted the meager store of staples in the kitchenette and the few dirty dishes in the sink. The bed was unmade. There were no bottles or cosmetics in the bathroom, but there was evidence on the floor that the occupant had been sick on the way to the bathroom. He was only mildly interested in the cheap plastic suitcase—empty, of course—but he was fascinated by the tufts of long blonde hair strewn about the place—on the pillow, the back of a chair, on the floor.

Ritter collected the hair into a neat bundle which he gave to the chief of the technical squad to deliver to Dr. Coffee at Pasteur Hospital.

On his way back to police headquarters the detective mused that while the pieces were beginning to fall into place, there were still too many pieces missing.

The phone was ringing when he walked into his office. State Highway Patrol was on the wire. "We just found that rental Thunderbird you're looking for," said the trooper at the other end.

"Good. Where? Southbank?"

"No, just off Lilac Lane. That's a side road runs into Interstate Seventy-five north of town."

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"Anywhere near the Summer Playhouse?"

"About half a mile."

"No sign of the driver?"

"Nope. Car was wrecked. Left the road on a turn and smacked into a tree. Blood on the windshield and an empty bourbon bottle on the floor. You sending your lab men out?"

"It's your backyard," Ritter said, "but I'll come over just to watch you boys work."

Half an hour later Ritter was watching but saw little he considered significant. There were, as he expected, a few coarse red hairs clinging to the bloodstains on the windshield. There were also what appeared to be dried drops of blood trailing footsteps that crossed the road and disappeared into the weeds and scrub growth. Troopers who had tried to follow the trail farther up the hillside found nothing.

Ritter watched several moulage men spraying shellac on tracks apparently made by a heavy car beyond the spot where the Thunderbird had left the road, as they prepared to make casts of the tire patterns. Then he drove back to Interstate 75 and proceeded to the Summer Playhouse.

Don Sutherland was busy tidying up last-minute details for the evening performance. He repeated for the detective the circumstances of his finding the dying Phyllis on the stage, but he could offer no explanation of her presence there. He was the last one to leave the night before, near midnight, and she was certainly not there then.

No, Sutherland said, there was no sign of a forced entrance. He was sure he had locked the front door when he went home, but someone must have left the stage door unlocked. No, he had not seen Tiberius Brown since the previous day, dead or alive. He offered to escort Ritter on a backstage tour to satisfy him that there were no corpses or near-corpses concealed in the scenery or dressing rooms. There were none.

On his way back to town Ritter realized that he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He stopped at a roadside diner and had two rare hamburgers and coffee.

Ritter was waiting in the pathology lab next morning when the Drs. Coffee and Mookerji came up from the basement carrying Mason jars and enamelware pails.

"What gives, Doc?" was the detective's greeting. "Developments?"

"Some," the pathologist replied. "At least we know that the late Miss Emerson did not patronize an abortionist, legal or otherwise, as you suspected."

"You mean I'm a bum diagnostician, Doc?"

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"No, no, Max." Dr. Coffee chuckled. "You were quite right in guessing the cause of her morning sickness. But her pregnancy was not terminated. In fact, she was about two months along."

"That long?"

"Yes. Is it a clue?"

"Offhand," said Ritter, "it practically eliminates Sutherland. I'd say Phyllis wasn't his type anyway—or any other girl."

"Another thing. The spectroscopist at Northbank U. came up with the characteristic bright green line that confirms my diagnosis of thallium poisoning. Now the most probable and most easily accessible source of thallium would be rat poison containing thallium sulfate. I seem to remember there is some sort of restriction on the sale of this. Give me a few hours and I'll have some information that will narrow the field when you start looking for the man who sold it. So—"

Dr. Mookerji interrupted. "Phone for you, Leftenant." He passed the instrument to Ritter.

"Speaking. Oh, hello, Brody . . . You did? Where? . . . For the love of—he is? Still passed out? No, look. It may not be just booze. Better bring him over to Pasteur. Sure. The emergency entrance."

Ritter turned from the phone. "One of my suspects just turned up," he said. "Tiberius Brown. Missing since Wednesday. Just staggered into a barber shop, asked to have his red beard shaved off, and passed out in the barber chair."

"Drunk?" Dr. Coffee asked. "Or an injury?"

"I don't know." Ritter shrugged. "The barber told Brody he stank of whiskey, but he had a nasty gash on his forehead. He also had a pistol in his pocket, so the barber called police. I told Brody to bring him here for diagnosis. Okay?"

"Why not? We'll intercept him in Emergency."

Tiberius Brown might have been a refugee from the Augean stables when he was carted into the Pasteur emergency ward. His magnificent beard, still unshaved, had accumulated so many leaves and other extraneous rubbish that it was as untidy as a sparrow's nest. He had not only slept in his clothes but had wallowed in them. Ritter was happy to note that one lucite button had been torn from his emerald-green shirt.

Dr. Coffee guided the admitting intern in making a differential diagnosis of Brown's coma. Was it concussion or merely alcoholic? After ten minutes of tests they concluded that the patient was suffering from complete exhaustion, lack of sleep, emotional trauma, and the remnants of a cataclysmic hangover. A nurse

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was summoned to give Tiberius Brown a cold bath, intravenous caffeine, and a few whiffs of oxygen.

Half an hour later the Bearded One opened his eyes, sat up, blinked, then fixed Ritter with a dismayed stare. "You!" he said. "I knew it would be you!"

"You're under arrest, Brown, for carrying a concealed and unlicensed weapon and for—"

"I know, I know." Brown closed his eyes again. "For murder. I killed her all right. Poor Phyllis! Okay, I'll go quietly." He held out his arms for handcuffs which were not there.

"Why have you been lying to me?" Ritter demanded. "Why have you been handing out phony addresses? What did you have against that girl, anyhow? Your fiancée, my eye! Missing, my foot! You knew where she was. You knew—"

"Ah-ee-ee-ee!" The red beard parted in an agonized cry that ended in a fit of sobbing. When he had pulled himself together, Brown said softly without looking at anyone, "Yes, I lied. Had I told you the truth Phyllis might still be alive. But no, I had to be the big hero, the knight in shining armor who alone would rescue the princess in distress. True, she was never my fiancée. Phyllis didn't give a damn for me, but she knew how crazy I was about her and she used me when it suited her. I lied when I let you think I'd been living with her."

"Then who was?" Ritter demanded. "She was two months' pregnant."

"I wouldn't know." The Bearded One shook his head bewilderedly.

"Guess."

"Well . . ." Brown swallowed hard. "Logically, and I am not logical at this moment, I should say it was someone she followed to Northbank."

"Like who?"

"Don Sutherland."

Ritter executed five cynical ha's in perfect rhythmic succession. "You must be kidding," he said.

"I lied when I said he offered her a job. *She* offered to join *him* without compensation."

"You really think Sutherland could make her pregnant?"

"Oscar Wilde could and did beget children, despite the Marquess of Queensbury and his son."

"Why did you go to see Gallick on Wednesday?"

Brown winced. "You're very clever at your trade, Lieutenant. Let me tell it my way. I'd been to see Sutherland to upbraid him for luring Phyllis to Northbank. He laughed at me. He suggested it was more likely that Phyllis had followed Simon Gallick. I didn't believe him."

"Why not?"

"I was sure he was diverting

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suspicion from himself. Furthermore, he seemed more Phyllis' type. She was a true hippie in the original sense. The flower child. Gentleness and love. Withdrawal from society, not revolt against it. Phyllis was not at all militant."

"But she did know Gallick when he was making trouble out there?"

"Everyone did. He saw to that. But as far as getting involved with him—" Brown shook his head. "Incredible."

"So you went to see Gallick on Wednesday," said Ritter, "and he had you thrown out?"

"Forcibly. How did you know?"

"I found one of your buttons in the weeds at the Love Farm. Torn off. Did he deny knowing Phyllis?"

"He said he couldn't remember the names of every coed who fought for the privilege of sitting at his feet."

"Why did you give me the routine of being frantic about the gal's disappearance when you knew she was at the Riverside Motel?"

"I didn't know it then, I swear," said Brown, mopping his brow. "I lied when I said she wrote me twice a week. I had only one letter from her. And then this telegram. I should have showed it to you. It read, 'Ty dear I'm in trouble. Please come to Northbank. Look for letter general delivery. Philomela.' That was my pet name for her. She hated it.

"When I saw you I'd been to general delivery. There was nothing. After my encounter with Gallick I was desperate. I dropped in at a bar and had a few drinks. Then I went back to the post office. There was a letter for me, with postage due on it. Someone had apparently dropped it in a box without a stamp on it. The envelope bore the return address of the Riverside Motel. Inside there was just a scrap of paper on which were two words: 'Help. Ty.' I went out to the motel and found there was no Phyllis Emerson registered."

"Didn't Sutherland tell you that she was using names like Ellen Terry and Minnie Maddern Fiske?" Ritter asked.

"Sutherland wouldn't tell me the right time. I believe he is allergic to professors of classical drama. In a word, Sutherland does not like me."

"What did you do when you were told the girl was not registered?"

"I had a few more drinks, I'm afraid," said Brown. "I worked myself into a state of great indignation, high courage, and firm resolution. I then bought a bottle of bourbon and a hand gun, which you have confiscated. I returned to the Riverside Motel. The lobby

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was still crowded with Legionnaires with potbellies and ridiculous garrison caps on their bald heads. I couldn't break through the mob. I was about to drive off when, at the end of the row of cabins, I saw a man helping a woman into a car. It was dark. I couldn't swear the girl was Phyllis, but the resemblance was certainly close, even at that distance."

"So you followed them?"

"Yes. The car turned north on Interstate Seventy-five, which convinced me that the man driving was Sutherland—the road leads past the Summer Playhouse. The driver must have seen that I was following, because he speeded up and took a side road in an effort to shake me off. He knew the road better than I did. I missed a turn and crashed into a tree."

"That was Wednesday night," Ritter said. "This is Friday morning. Where were you all day yesterday?"

"I'm not sure." Brown dug his fists into his eyes. "I managed to stagger uphill into the trees before I passed out on Wednesday night. I must have slept around the clock. It was dark when I awoke. I had no idea what time it was. Somehow I made my way to Sutherland's theater. It was deserted. I thumbed a ride into town. The driver had his radio on, and I heard the news—that Phyllis was dead. I jumped out at the first stoplight and got drunk all over again.

"This morning I decided to quit playing the hippie. I would revert to being a square—get my beard shaved off, throw away my masquerade, and rejoin my generation from which I had temporarily seceded in the hope of pleasing Phyllis. In that, too, I apparently failed."

"Pretty glib," Ritter said. "Don't you wish half of it was true? Because I'm holding you on the weapons charge while I check every damned thing you've been telling me."

"Max, I've got to get back to the lab and read today's surgicals," said Dr. Coffee, breaking his long silence. "When you've finished the homework I've laid out for you, why don't you round up your cast of characters and bring them up to my lab—say, at five this afternoon? I'd like to kibitz. I might even help a little."

Lieutenant Ritter had a busy schedule after leaving the hospital. First he booked Tiberius Brown on the weapons charge. He next deployed a dozen detectives to canvass pharmacies and hardware stores for information on buyers of such thallium-sulfate-based pesticides as Dy-ratt and Pestkill. He had Zona Billworth Gallick's Cadillac towed to police headquarters for a thorough examina-

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tion and vacuum cleaning. The Jaguar—Zona's wedding present to Simon—was no longer at the Love Farm. Neither were the two Gallicks.

When picked up, the Gallicks were casing all probable sites for television cameras at American Legion Hall so that their planned reception for the Assistant Secretary of Defense would get maximum exposure. They were, of course, indignant at being interrupted.

Don Sutherland was indignant too, but he came quietly.

When the last of Ritter's perspiring candidates for a first-degree murder indictment had found a seat in the laboratory, Dr. Coffee spoke.

"All this may seem somewhat irregular to you," he said, "but the circumstances are not exactly usual. I asked Lieutenant Ritter to bring you here because Phyllis Emerson died in this hospital, and I have certain medical findings bearing on her death. You are all in some way a part of Miss Emerson's past."

"Not I," Zona Gallick interrupted. "I never laid eyes on her, living or dead."

"Your husband has," said Ritter. "That makes you a member of the club, too."

"What the hell club are you talking about?" Gallick demanded.

"The Damn Liars Society," said Ritter. "Mrs. Gallick says she's never seen Phyllis Emerson, but a Southbank police officer sees the dead girl getting out of a taxi at Mrs. Gallick's so-called Love Farm. Professor Brown is lying his head off since Wednesday morning, but is he lying when he says Don Sutherland drove Phyllis away from the Riverside Motel on Wednesday night? We got evidence that Phyllis was at the motel, all right, and Sutherland can't explain how she gets to the stage of his theater, passed out and baldheaded, to start dying."

"You might at least tell us what she died of," said Zona Gallick.

"She was poisoned," said Dr. Coffee, "by thallium sulfate almost surely obtained from rat poison."

"I can't think of anybody stupid enough to swallow rat poison without a struggle," Sutherland broke in. "It must be pretty nasty. Even Phyllis would balk at that."

"She might not have," said Dr. Coffee, "if somebody had told her she was taking an abortifacient. She was eight weeks pregnant, you know, and there are indications she was seeking to terminate her pregnancy. In that case she might very well have held her nose and taken anything that she was told would solve her problem."

The pathologist paused. The silence was broken only by the hum of the air conditioner and

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the rustle of people shifting in their seats. He continued, "It has been relatively easy to locate the source of the rat poison that killed Phyllis Emerson. In 1965 the U.S. Department of Agriculture banned the interstate shipment of thallium-based pesticides for home use because of an increasing number of cases of accidental poisoning of children. However, the Department made no effort to recall old stocks on the shelves of retail outlets until prodded by a Congressional Committee four years later—last month, in fact. So Lieutenant Ritter had relatively few stores to canvass before finding those still selling thallium sulfate pesticide. Max?"

Ritter got up and opened the door leading to Dr. Coffee's private office. A wizened little man in a seersucker suit emerged, blinking through thick spectacles as he smiled at the group.

"Mr. Stone is a pharmacist who owns a drug store on Taft Avenue," Ritter said. "Do you see any of your customers here, Mr. Stone?"

"Only one," replied the old man, squinting at each face in turn. "The lady over there." He pointed at Zona Gallick. "She bought the last six cans of Dy-Ratt I had in stock. Just last week."

"Of course I buy rat poison." Zona was on her feet. Crimson flooded her cheeks. "And with good reason. The farm would be overrun with the filthy beasts if we didn't keep the rodent population explosion under control. I repeat, I've never seen the dead woman in my life."

"Where were you on Wednesday night, Zona baby?" asked Ritter sweetly.

"None of your business," snapped Zona's husband.

"Oh, stop it, Si. It's no secret. I was addressing a meeting of the American Legion Auxiliary, trying to persuade the women to join our anti-war demonstration against the Assistant Secretary tomorrow."

"Did you drive your own car, Mrs. Gallick?" Dr. Coffee asked.

"I—No." Zona turned suddenly to stare at Gallick. "Si needed the big car that night."

"I had to pick up some signs and banners and other heavy protest material that wouldn't fit in my Jag," said Gallick.

"I bring this up, Mrs. Gallick," the pathologist continued, "because Lieutenant Ritter has been exploring the upholstery of your Cadillac with a vacuum cleaner this afternoon and he has brought me a handful of long blonde hair."

"So what?" Zona's cheeks were losing color. "We have many fair-haired friends."

"I'm sure you have," said Dr. Coffee, "but this particular hair was once Phyllis Emerson's, no doubt about it. You see, thallium

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has the peculiar property of causing human hair to fall out. It also has the property, when ingested, of being absorbed by all tissues of the body, including the hair. The hair found in your car has been shown by photospectrographic analysis to contain thallium. Likewise, the hair lost at the Riverside Motel. Likewise, on the stage of the Northbank Summer Playhouse."

"Are you implying, Doctor, that my husband transported this woman to or from a motel while I was addressing the Legion wives?"

"The evidence indicates that one of you did."

"But why? Why?" Zona's flushed cheeks were chalky white.

"In your own case, Mrs. Gallick, you may have wanted to remove a threat to your marriage."

"Don't make me laugh, Doctor. Do you think Si would jeopardize his marriage, his career, and his whole life for some fawning little trollop from nowhere?" She glared at her husband who seemed to shrink visibly.

"You said it, Zona baby," said Max Ritter. "Your Si knows which side his bed is buttoned on. He wouldn't stop at a little thing like murder if he thought a trusting little girl he'd made pregnant was going to come between him and your old man's millions."

"Don't listen to that dirty fink, Zona."

Zona had not stopped staring at her husband. "Si," she said, "did you? With that little tramp? Not that I really care, of course—"

"Of course not," said Gallick.

"In the interests of justice," said Dr. Coffee, "I'm going to propose a little scientific experiment. Dr. Mookerji here will take a few drops of blood from each of you gentlemen, and then—"

"What for?" Sutherland asked.

"A paternity exclusion test," said the pathologist smoothly. "I've already typed the blood of the late Miss Emerson. She is type O. Now by comparing the blood types of possible fathers with that of Miss Emerson's unborn child, we may be able to exclude all you gentlemen from the responsibility of having been the sire. For example, since Miss Emerson was an O, and if the unborn child has AB blood, any one of you three who has type A, B, or O is positively excluded. Any objection, Professor Brown?"

"None whatever."

"And you, Mr. Sutherland?"

"Will it hurt?"

"No more than a pinprick."

"Okay then."

"You can go to hell!" Simon Gallick shouted before Dr. Coffee could put the question to him. "Not one drop!"

"But Si," said Zona, "if this

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test will put a stop to these silly accusations—"

"I know my rights!" Gallick's tiny eyes bulged and his lips were contorted as though he was about to foam at the mouth. "I refuse to give my blood to or for anyone in this stinking society anywhere—here, or in Vietnam or Korea or Northbank or any place. I'll go to jail first."

Dr. Coffee made a helpless gesture with both hands. "Draw your own conclusions, Max. I suggest you get a court order."

"I'm going to hold every screwball of this whole screwy lot as material witnesses," said Ritter.

"Don't start reciting that stupid rigamarole about my right to remain silent and all that jazz." Gallick stuck out his lower jaw at the detective. "I know it all by heart. Phone your lawyer, Zona. We're entitled to that."

When Ritter and his gaggle of bizarre characters had departed, Dr. Mookerji held out a chubby brown hand to Dr. Coffee. "Felicitations, Dr. Sahib," he said.

"For what, Doctor?"

"You are doubtless preparing paper for medical journals describing unique Coffee method of securing agglutination reaction from blood of unborn embryos," said the Hindu.

Dr. Coffee laughed. "Nonsense, Dr. Mookerji. You know as well as I do that a two-months' embryo has not yet developed agglutinins in its blood. A baby may not even have agglutinogens sensitive enough for testing several months after birth."

"Nevertheless—" Dr. Mookerji wagged his turbaned head twice to the left "—was able to detect overt symptoms of dismay, consternation, and second-degree panic in person of Simon Gallick when asked to volunteer blood sample."

"I hope you noted," said Dr. Coffee grinning broadly, "that I promised no actual result from an agglutination test. I merely said *'if* the unborn child had AB blood.' I was only trying to inspire the young man with the fear of God—Whom he doubtless doesn't even believe exists."

Dr. Mookerji frowned. "Am somewhat nonplused," he said, "regarding focus of suspicions upon violent young gent with sad mustache when poisonous hairs belonging to deceased were retrieved from motor car belonging to wife. Please elucidate, Dr. Sahib."

"I think it's fairly obvious," Dr. Coffee explained, "that Gallick was scattering red herrings all over the place—assuming, of course, that he's the culprit. First of all, he went to great lengths to keep the California girl away from his wife. I'm inclined to believe Mrs. Gallick when she says she never laid eyes on Miss

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Emerson, who stayed meekly put in her hotel until she found herself in trouble. When she came over to the Gallick Love Farm for a confrontation with Gallick, Mrs. Gallick was probably not there, and he whisked the girl away to isolation in that motel. The motel also had the advantage over the Hilltop Hotel in that she would be unable to call a house physician when she began to suspect that she might not survive the supposed abortifacient.

"What inspired him to move the girl from the motel to the Summer Playhouse I can only imagine. When she did not die at once, I suppose he panicked and thought that somehow he could implicate Sutherland by leaving the girl to die in the Playhouse."

"Am further nonplused and perplexed." Dr. Mookerji's frown persisted. "You are therefore of opinion that fear of God will impel confession from youthful iconoclast? Or that courts will accept godly fear as legal evidence of guilt?"

"Not at all. But we have reached a point in this case where police science must now take over. Pathology has determined the cause of death, furnished a likely motive for murder, and pointed a way to unmasking the culprit. From here on it's up to Max."

The phone rang as if on cue.

"Pathology. Dr. Coffee . . . You have? Good, Max . . . You did? Fine. Yes, of course I'll testify."

"Leftenant Ritter has no doubt unmasked culprit?" said Dr. Mookerji.

"Max's technical crew has developed a fine set of fingerprints from Cabin Fourteen at the Riverside Motel. Simon Gallick, standing on his civil rights, refuses to be printed unless charges are placed against him. However, he was printed in California when jailed for inciting to riot at Farwestern. The Henry classification has just been telephoned in, and the match is perfect."

The Hindu resident beamed. "Am greatly gratified," he said, "that native land has contributed to solving criminous enigma of lady with poisoned hair."

"Really?" Dr. Coffee smiled with tolerant disbelief. "And what, may I ask, is India's contribution to this case?"

"Both essential and copious," replied Dr. Mookerji. "Fingerprints first used to trap felonious wrongdoers by Sir William Herschel while Calcutta police functionary in 1877. Furthermore, classification system just cited by San Francisco was invented by Sir Edward Henry while Inspector-General of Bengal Police at turning of century. Okey doke?"

"Okey doke," said Dr. Coffee. "I'll inform Lieutenant Ritter of his debt to Bengal."

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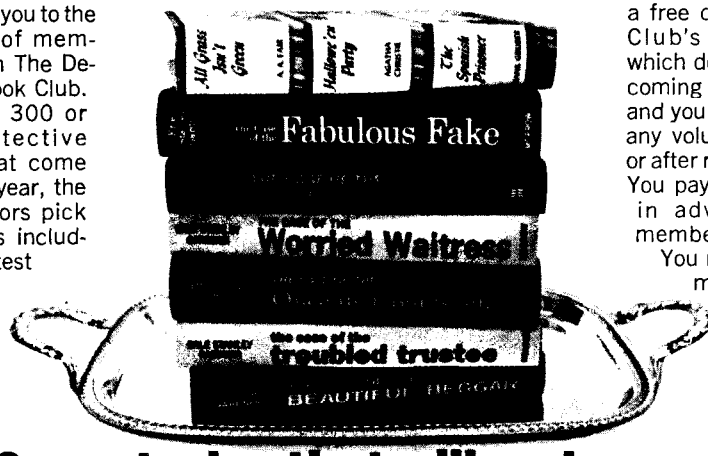

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